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by CLEM COLT

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

First Magazine Publication

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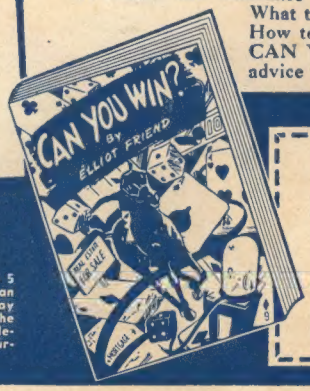

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REAL WESTERN

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

Law of the Lost Lands

by CLEM COLT 6

Antrim knew that Jack Gauze was a haunted man, a strange thing to see in one who had ridden with Curly Bill. But of greater importance was the secret of Curly Bill's treasure!

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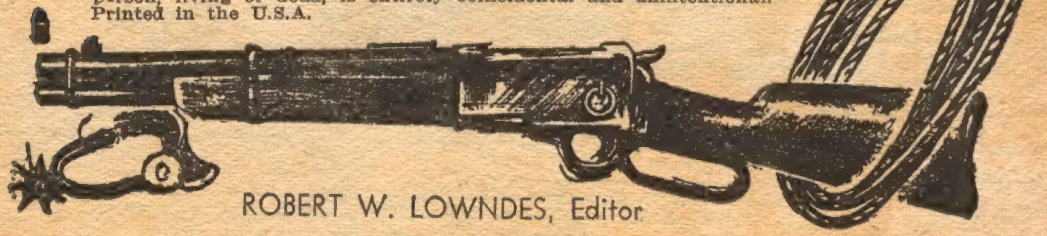

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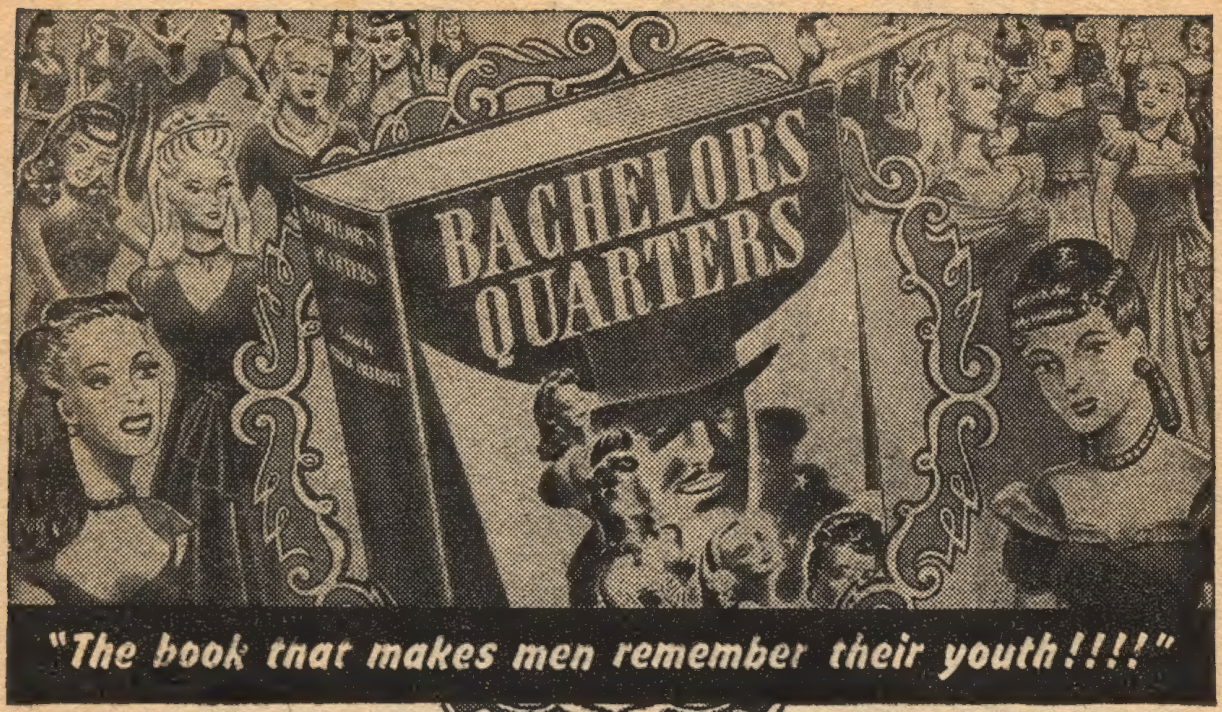

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LAW of the LOST LANDS

Brand New Book-Length Novel

by
CLEM COLT

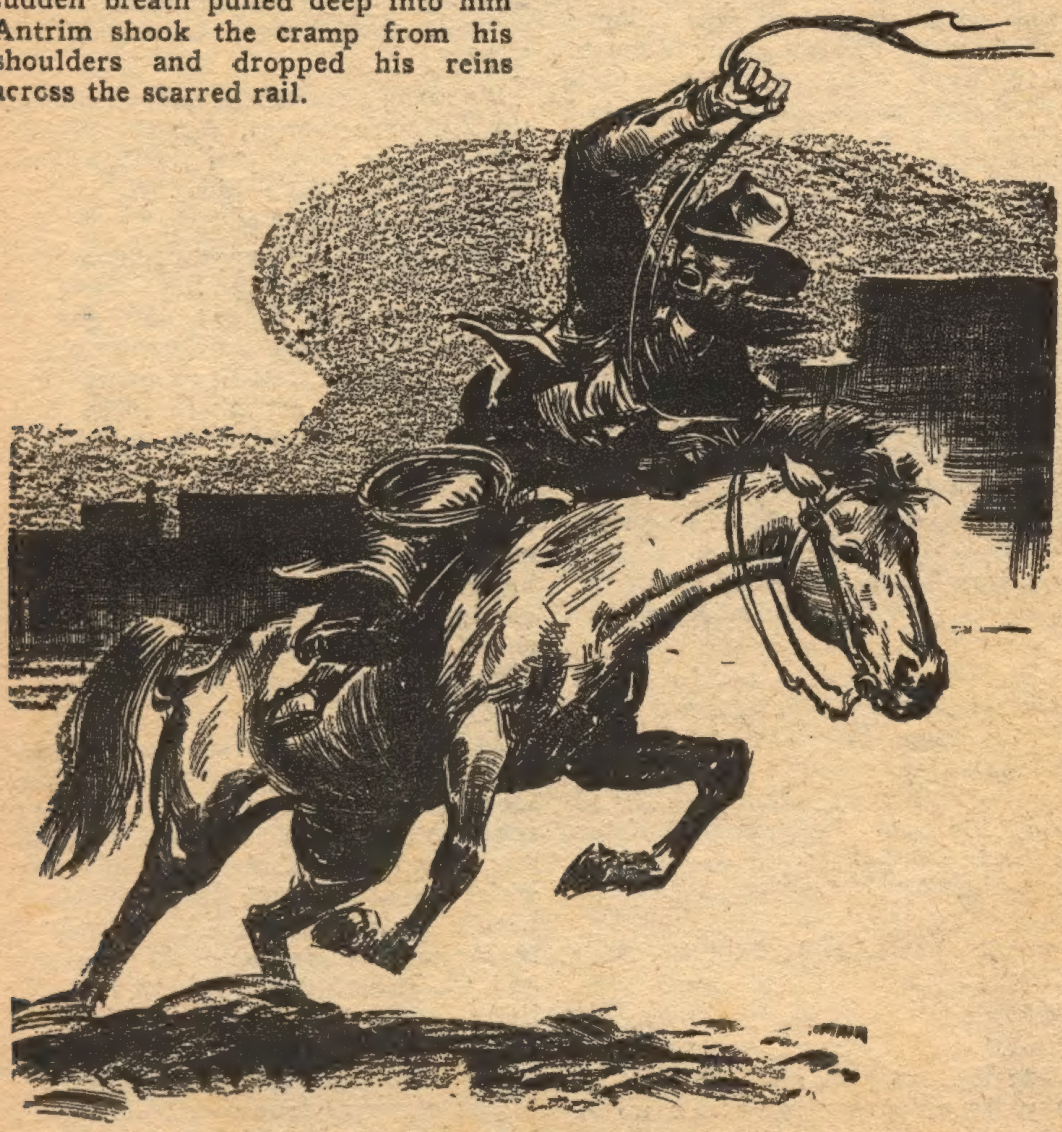
A fabulous fortune in outlaw loot, buried somewhere by the remnants of Curly Bill's bunch; a survivor of the gang, fear-haunted, desperately searching for the treasure; a trigger-fast trio of hardcases, determined to assist in the hunt; a girl who knew the ways of the lobo too well, and a disillusioned young man hiding his real name — they all came together in this hide-out, eyes watching for the Law and double-cross moves from each other, and caring only for the law of the wolf!

RETURN OF THE NATIVE

SHOULDERS canted, Guy Antrim stood by the tie rail fronting the *Crystal Palace Bar* and had his careful look down Allen Street. This was Tombstone—dark and still. So still, talk sound and the clink of glasses welled clearly into the street's blurred shadows. With a sudden breath pulled deep into him Antrim shook the cramp from his shoulders and dropped his reins across the scarred rail.

He did not step in at once, even then. He seemed debating something; took another long look up and down the dark way.

He made a lone, still shape limned that way in the lamp glow dimly spread through the dust of the window. There was something odd, at once bleak and forlorn, in the arrested placement of this man's high



Idy Red was struggling with the ruffian . . .

shape; something suggestive of far, dim trails, of wind in the passes, of star shine and fire smoke—something sad and immutable.

His head tipped gently a little sideward and downward as though he were listening. To the music, perhaps, of forgotten fiddles...to the faded sounds of some old carousal. Recalling this place at an earlier date...Remembering old harridans and reckless young beauties diked out in their paint and flimsy finery...the sheen of their slippers seen between bars.

With a kind of sigh he put broad shoulders to the slatted batwings and quietly, leisurely—but with a cold sure glance, stepped smoothly inside.

The *Crystal Palace*, his glance seemed to say, had not changed much. There were three or four shirt-sleeved men at the bar, a sleepy-eyed barkeep back of it. The remembered pictures looked down from the walls, cobwebbed now, seeming cheap and tawdry to Antrim's grown-up mind. The whole place looked shabby, the shine long departed from its glass and mahogany.

The apron slowly got off his elbow. "What'll you hev?" he said through his yawning.

"Bourbon," said Antrim, and sat down at a table.

Behind him were the gambling rigs, dust deep on the cloths concealing them. One faro bank was open but the dealer sat snoring with a hat on his face.

The barman brought over a bottle and glass. Antrim said, "What do you call this town, friend?"

"Tombstone."

"No foolin'? I always 'lowed Tombstone was a hell-roarin' twister—a kinda all-night town on the No-Return Trail."

"Was it right."

"What happened? Mines peter out?"

"Flooded. That'll be six bits to you, Mister."

"For the one glass? Ought to bury the place an' put a marker up if you're goin' to charge museum prices. Ain't this where Curly Bill hung out?"

"We buried *him* a long while back," said the barkeep, sniffing contemptuously. "Look—" he said, "I'm a new man here; don't know much about them hellbendin' days. But if it's all the same to you, Mister, we collect for the drinks when we serve 'em."

Antrim dug up a handful of silver. A reflective light looked out of his eyes as he fingered the coins and stared at the barkeep. "Old Dick Clark still around these parts?"

The barkeep shrugged, but his cheeks showed interest. "He's round off'n on, when he ain't off sharpin' some cattleman's convention. Keeps a room at the *Cosmopolitan;* if he's in town now, they'll know about it."

"Still runnin' the old *Alhambra*, is he?"

The man showed a scowl and picked up Antrim's money, and the bottle. "Mebbe," he said. "you better talk to the sheriff—that's him over there. With the gun," he added.

Antrim did not appear much perturbed. He fingered his drink as though entirely at ease. He was a wind-burned man in brush-clawed range clothes, a trail-tired man taking relaxation. He sat there loose and comfortably sprawled. A cow boss, maybe, with his mind on his cattle.

The stranger inspected the men ranged along the bar and a grin suddenly turned his dark face boyish. "Hi, Tex!" he called, and was coming up out of his chair when the sheriff's round-wheeling, unwinking regard suspended the action and left him staring.

There was an austere look to the sheriff's jowls. He was a short, stocky man with a broad pair of shoulders below a thick red neck. A mustached man whose every hair and whisker was the same glittering black as the look of his stare. He had a Mex cigar clamped between his teeth and a diamond flashed from his left little finger. The other hand's thumb showed tucked in his belt ostentatiously close to a pearl butted pistol.

The stranger frowned. "Don't you remember me, Tex?" I'm the—"

With the glint of his eyes turned blacker, brighter, the lawman de-

claimed: "My name is John Slaughter. John Slaughter—remember it."

"Oh—sorry," Antrim said, and sat down in his chair.

He folded lean arms across his chest and focused his stare on the room's high ceiling, covered these latter years with tin. It was the first time he'd thought of this room as big. But it *was* big, he noticed; big as all hell—though there the comparison ended. The place was not warm in the slightest; it did not abound in either cheer or friendship. Its chill got deep down into him—even into his bones like the breath-smoked air of the Dakota morning.

The things he saw in the ceiling's paint were visions dragged out of his past.

"HALT!"

Brake blocks squealed. The Benson stage swayed with every horse back on its haunches. Dust billowed up in a brick-red fog, and three masked men with leveled Winchesters stepped suddenly out of the surrounding mesquite.

Bob Paul, who was driving, grabbed up his shotgun in one smooth, unexpectedly swift sweep of a flying right hand. As the butt touched his shoulder the nearest outlaw fired. Splinters flew from the seat. Paul triggered both barrels without apparent effect. Timed with the roar of those shots the blackleg on the far side opened up on Bud Philpot, described in the Wells-Fargo books as 'driver'. Philpot sprang erect—sprang from his seat like a rattler had struck him. His buckling knees wouldn't hold him; he screamed and choked and fell from his perch, pitching headlong between the squatting wheelers.

The terrified horses lunged into a run, dragged the careening stage, up the grade at a headlong gallop. There was eighty thousand cached in the boot and the cursing bandits triggered frantically.

But Bob Paul had the reins again and he popped his blacksnake wickedly. To the scream and thump of whistling lead the riddled stage clattered over the crest, leaving two men sprawled in the dust and three highwaymen frothing with rage.

* * *

ANTRIM remembered how the Earps had caught him. At the Redfield ranch. He'd been milking a cow. Twelve full boxes of six-shooter cartridges cached in his pockets and a rifle, strapped loaded, across his shoulders. Two shell belts buckled round his waist. Looked kind of suspicious taking all that artillery to get milk from a cow. And his horse had been found at Wheaton's place, all lathered and blown, ashake like an aspen. They wouldn't believe the horse had been stolen; wouldn't believe one least word he said.

"Stole, my gran'mother!" Behan had sneered, and they'd locked him up in the Tombstone jail.

"I got a right to a lawyer!" declared Antrim hotly; but all they gave him was hoots and jeers.

Town opinion had been freely expressed. The stick-up had added unneeded fuel to the feud in progress between the Earps and the Clanton-McLowery clan. Said one newspaper with flamboyant authority: "*Positive proof exists four men took part in the attack on the Benson stage. The fourth is in Tombstone....*"

Antrim was in Tombstone, prey for a mob. Watching, night after night, the pattern of bars pushed across his cell by a waning moon; hemmed by enemies, scapegoat for plotters. Hardly more than a boy, caged and chained like a wolf.

He called the sheriff. "Tell Behan I'll talk."

* * *

"WELL?" Behan said. "What's on your mind?"

He looked at the boy's pale face with a grin. "Figurin' to save your hide, are you? Time to of squealed was when we caught you—"

Antrim's chin came up. He was young, but proud. "I'm not 'squealing', Behan."

The sheriff's grin showed a little parched. "All right," he grunted. "You're a tough one, ain't you? What do you want to tell me?"

The huddled shape on the ground was Bat Kettrick.

Antrim recalled that moment like it had been only yesterday. Recalled the wild urge he had felt to elaborate—to show his part lighter. He might quite as well have; Johnny Behan was a political sheriff—a past master of expediency, a man distrustful of things not compatable to his own way of thinking. Antrim's tale of how three San Simon friends had got up a bet to be decided by a lion hunt left Behan coldly incredulous. One, Antrim said, had bet another he'd not dare tackle a lion with a pistol; the third of the trio was to have held the stakes.

Antrim had been too busy to go along himself. Been working for

Redfield, a San Pedro rancher; but they'd given him a part. He was to have brought them the guns and cartridges, all of which were to have been special.

Johnny Behan sniffed skeptically. "Where was they figurin' to hunt these lions?"

"Up in the Dragoons. They told me to meet them at a wood chopper's camp—"

"I guess so," Behan scoffed. "If that's the best you can do you might's well stop right now."

"You found the guns and cartridges, didn't you?"

"Yeah. An' found you at Redfield's milkin' a cow. An' your hoss at Wheaton's—plumb wore to a frazzle. It don't wash, button; you held them road-runners' hosses for 'em. When you seen Philpot drop, you got cold feet an' rattled your hooks. You had the right idea but you didn't go far enough."

Antrim had shut his mouth then. He could see well enough he'd been picked for the scapegoat; picked alike by the law and those he'd thought were his friends. The moral of that had been ground deep into him. It had never left him in the eight years since.

He had not been hanged—but through no fault of Behans.

Antrim wished he might find some cure for memory. If there was one, it had eluded him. It was something, he guessed, you just had to put up with, like measles and mumps and the green-apple colic. It had killed all the decent things in him, he thought. A thief in the night that had stolen his youth and mortgaged his soul for eternity.

"That cub's goin' to swing," Behan told his cronies; but the sheriff's opinion had been expresses a bit hasty. The horse they had found at Wheaton's ranch proved not so unlucky as the boy had thought it.

The sheriff had gone larruping off to Helm's ranch to rejoin the scalp-hunters when a small-spread rancher chanced to ride into town and take a real fancy to Antrim's horse. "I dunno," the man said, "I kinda like him someway."

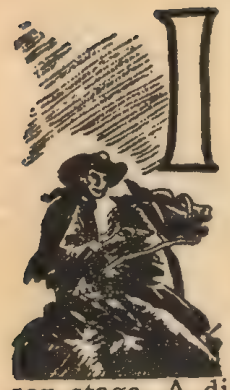
"You might's well sell him, the under-sheriff, Woods, told the prisoner. "You won't be ridin' that plug any more."

And so it had been arranged.

They brought Antrim over to the sheriff's office, got him a pen to write his signature. While the notary was fixing up the dotted line and the rancher and Woods were swapping small talk, Antrim, rather quietly, had stepped out the door and departed forthwith for new pastures.

2

JAKE GAUZE



IT DIDN'T seem like a handful of years could make such a difference in the life of a town. Roaring Tombstone had gone to seed. Gone were the bleached-eyed tinhorns and gunslicks—departed as the dust of the Benson stage. A different breed ran the old town now, a more leisurely tribe. Ranching men, for the most part, who looked quite content to raise cows for a living and leave hell-raising to the ghosts of the past. Texans from the prickly pear country, bringing their stock and their womenfolks with them; bronzed men these, soft and drawling of speech. Quiet, intent fellows. Men with a purpose.

The red lights were out; the mines closed, and the Poker Flats phase of the town's existence had faded into the gray obscurity of all ephemeral things. Farewell to the boomers, the miners and drifters who had been such a comfort to the old regime. Adios to the quick-drawing, hard-swearing sports of the past; hail and farewell.

Antrim drained his glass, reached for the bottle; it wasn't there. He remembered the barkeep and his lips showed a faint little quirk at the corners.

He rumpled his thick yellow hair and sighed, slacked his lithe body back into the chair. Bone-weary he was with the miles behind him; saddle-crampled like he had not been since he quit this town, eight long years before.

Seen thus he was a reticent man with a dark and highboned cast of feature that appeared long acquainted with the way of the elements. He was lean and tall yet broad of shoulder. His legs, when he stood, showed their bow in the sundry cracks and creases of his brush-clawed leather chaps. The soft topped boots that cased his feet were powdered thick with the gray of the trail; the long shanked spurs buckled onto them held no gleam, no show of care, no danglers. They were old, like a cartridge belt strapped about his waist. Lil the floppy brimmed hat that he wore on his head.

His hair looked in need of trimming, but his jaw was clean and freshly shaved and was, in its way, a reflection of character. Like the cold gray way his eyes looked at you from under their yellow, tufted brows.

Night air, crisp with touch of coming dawn, was moving in off the deserted street, bringing a curious mingling of town smells and fetching sharp flavor from the desert beyond.

Antrim worried his glass with the blunt ends of his fingers and scanned the room with an increased awareness. The sheriff, John Slaughter, was watching him. Trying to fit him, Antrim guessed bitterly, into one of the faded dodgers that would be tacked to the walls of his office.

To hell with him; let Slaughter try—let him try all he damned well wanted of the only man ever thrown in a jail for the fizzled stickup of the Benson stage.

TALK DRONED on, turned at last from women and cattle to a race, apparently run last year, between some foreigner and one of Slaughter's deputies. Seemed to have been pulled off in New Mexico near Silver City. The foreigner had ridden a velocipede: Billy King, Slaughter's deputy, had done his riding on 'Figure 2'— "the meanest damn' bronc this side of hell's furnace." A fifty mile stretch, and the horse had won by two minutes and a half, in some kind of a sand storm.

Antrim wasn't much interested; then a sharper voice brought him out of his thinking. A newcomer's voice that hadn't got into the talk before. That voice, and the sudden silence after it, pulsed a slogging quiver through Antrim's muscles.

The rasp of spur rowels brought his glance up. The new arrival was coming toward him. Tall and gangling he was, with a bright, queer attention in his sly little eyes. He brought up beside Antrim, leaned his hands on the table with his bony thighs pressed hard against it. "Don't I know you, Poker Face?"

"Do you?"

"Seems like I ort to." The gaunt man considered him, head cocked, eyes knowing. "Could swear I seen you before some place..."

Antrim shrugged. "Could be, I reckon."

The slat-shaped man continued to stare with an undaring frankness; he finally shook his head, sort of grunted. He rasped a rope scarred fist on his chin. "How do they call you where you come from, pardner?"

"It ain't been the custom where *I* come from—"

"Never mind— I got a reason fer askin'."

"Guy Antrim's the name."

Antrim said it coldly but the man only grinned. "That ain't the handle you packed in the ol' days. Never been no Antrims round yere—but *you* been 'ere, friend. I c'n tell by yer eyes—I never forgit 'em.

"No matter." He gave an impatient twist to his shoulders, waggled a hand and called up the barkeep. "Want a job of work?"

"What kind of work?"

Steps were approaching, The man looked around. "Never mind," he said to the apron. Then he pulled up a chair, put his arms on the table. "I'm Gauze—Jake Gauze," he mentioned casually. His bright little eyes kept searching Antrim. It went curiously over his garb, piece by piece, rested longest on the shape of his hands; on his hands and the holstered gun at his thigh.

"Use that gun?"

"If it's *that* kind of job—"

"Hang hold!" Gauze growled. "I'm a rancher," he said, leaning forward—"savvy? Got a two-bit spread over to Skeleton Canyon; run a few bangtails—forty-five cows. Hard country. Wildest part of the Peloncillos; I range from the Animas clear down the valley. Hard t' keep any hands. Lonesome. Ride f' days without clappin' eye to another soul. Used t'be the main trail fer smugglers—back in the Curly Bill days, that is. Some of the breed still usin' it. Pick up a bit of my stuff off'n on. Like t' hire you t' watch it. Howcome I ast can you use that gun."

Antrim said, "I see."

The gaunt man looked at him oddly. "I don't reckon—"

"I see," Antrim said, "plenty good enough; I wouldn't care for that country."

"'F it's a matter of money—"

"Money ain't worth much after you're buried."

Gauze scowled. "I don't get that, friend."

"Does it matter?"

"Matters t'me. Look here—" on the table. He lowered his voice. "Mebbe you don't quiet savvy my talk, friend. You kin write your own ticket—"

Antrim shook his head. "Not interested."

Gauze said, "You better git interested then. he's on'y two things brings a feller out this way. Fear an' hate; you don't look like yer huntin' nobody."

3

SKELETON CANYON

ALL THROUGH the black shank of night they rode and all through the following morning, with never a stop save to breathe the horses. You'd have thought they were chased, to judge by Gauze's actions. Now that Antrim had consented to go with him all the gaunt man's interest seemed wrapped in speed. *"Must be scared,"* Antrim thought, *the ghosts of them smugglers have stole him blind while he's been away."*

Antrim's seat in the saddle was numb from the business.

Saddle creak and hoof pound. Mile after mile through the greasewood waste that hemmed them unbroken through the day's early hours. Antrim's brows went up a little when, breakfastless, they skirted Gleeson; but he kept his own counsel, consoled with the knowledge that each bone jolting, dust-streaked mile was carrying him nearer to that which had determined his unlikely return. All the way from distant Tubac he'd been trying to figure how to reach this region without exciting suspicion. Not that he feared recognition it seemed hardly likely, after eight long years, and would remember him for Luther King. It was simply that strangers, in this kind of country, weren't wanted; they were eyed with distrust and all their movements scanned closely.

This tie-up with Gauze, though he'd made it seem otherwise, was in the nature of a godsend. That Gauze was a scoundrel seemed entirely likely; it bothered Guy Antrim no more than the heat.

Yet more and more as the sun climbed higher, Antrim's got to probing the rancher's hurry. It was an unhealthy haste; and it turned him broodingly thoughtful when Courtland, too, was passed without stopping. What need kept them flogging through the white glare of mid-day?

"Got a claim, or somethin' you're scared'll be jumped?"

Gauze said nothing; never turned in his saddle.

A wicked flame kindled up in Guy Antrim, but he kept his thoughts muzzled for another half hour. Then temper got the best of him. "You must have Injuns camped on your backtrail. What you done—run off with some squaw?"

Gauze sent a curse back over his shoulder. "When I want any wind I kin hire me a windmill!"

"You better be thinkin'" said Antrim, "where you can hire some more horses."

Gauze snorted; squinched up his eyes and stared off yonder at the blue, hazed distance. Then he brought his gaze back, chewed a moment and spat. "Don't worry about them horses," he said.

* * *

THEY NOONED at Pearce; it was 2:15.

The weatherbitten buildings with their warped and sandscoured corners and their dusty, cobwebbed windows were like old friends to Antrim. He had known this region well in the old days—too well, perhaps, for the look of his cheeks turned dark and somber and the light came into his eyes again that had attracted Gauze in the *Crystal Palace.* The gunslick look there was no mistaking.

As at Tombstone, Jakes knowing scrutiny noticed. "Wonder the place don't curl up an' burn;" he led the way into a hash house.

They ate without any attempt at talking, the only two men in sight at this hour. When he was finished Jake reached him a toothpick from a plate of the same on the counter. He said: "We're cuttin' no'theast acrost the valley. We'll put on the nosebag at Dos Cabezas. Come you're needin' ca'tridges or other oddments, right here is the place t' be gettin' 'em. No more towns this side of the ranch."

There was a kind of sly challenge curling round in his stare, but Antrim's quick look found the man's blunt fingers toying his fork. "No more towns," Antrim said. "What's the matter with Bow—"

The shade of Jake's eyes suddenly stopped him.

"Slick, ain't you?" Antrim murmured dustily.

But Jake only grinned. "No reason fer stoppin' at Bowie," he said. "We're goin' right on around it."

Antrim shrugged, leisurely fished out the makings and shaped up a smoke. "All right with me. We can amble whenever it suits you." He dragged a match across his pants and eyed Jake through the flare of it.

"Pretty soon," Jake said. "We're gettin' fresh horses first, though. Still with that pleased, sly look in his eye, "We'll be leavin' ours," he mentioned. "What you want for your bronc? Don't want you t' be doin' no

worryin' about 'im; I'll take him off your hands."

Antrim stared with a heightend interest. "Seems like you're settin' a powerful lot of store by me. It don't pay, Gauze, to put all your chips in one basket."

"Man's got to chance somethin' someplace."

"You're puttin' your weight on a mighty weak reed."

"Never mind," Jake grinned, "I'll take care o' that." He brought his solid chin up then and eyed his man with an unwinking hardness. "When I hire a hand I figure t' work him. You'll work just as good on one o' my broncs as you ever will on your own, I reckon; I'll take smart care o' your ridin' needs."

Like that, Jake figured to keep him; going to fix it so Antrim couldn't slide out on him. If Guy thought to quit he'd have either to steal a horse or to hoof it. Hoofing it was out of the question.

Hankering to see if his guessing was right, "My bronc," Antrim said, "will cost you a cool hundred dollars."

Jake counted the bills from a well-heeled purse and pushed them down the counter. "I'll look for you at the livery," he grinned.

THEY RODE all afternoon—rode steady. The sun's brassy rays smashed down on their backs and a gusty wind whipped grit off the desert that whistled and stung as it pattered their faces; even the folds of their pulled-up scarfs were small guarantee against its bite.

They made no stops, not even short ones to rest the horses. The urge to speed was on Gauze again—indeed, it had never left him; as the day wore on he pushed the broncs with an unsparing hand.

Antrim noticed that, now and again, he would twist his head for a look at their backtrail. Once, after Gauze had swung front again, Antrim took a look himself. But there was little to see; he cut no sign of anyone following.

The Cherrycows were a dark shade southeastward when they reached Dos Cabezas at something past six.

Gauze pulled his staggering bronc to a walk. Antrim's eyes, on his own mount, showed in their gun-steel taken for pleasure; he felt damned bad about those horses.

Gauze's round-swung stare was red rimmed and glinting. "We ain't stoppin' here— savvy?"

He looked for argument; was plainly cocked to reach for his gun. You could tell by the cast of his shoulders. Antrim said nothing.

With a snort Jake climbed out of his saddle, left his foundered horse on braced legs in the road. Cramp was in his stiff-gaited walk as he led the way to ramshackle enclosure built of termitey poles in a group of salt cedars beyond the hamlet's last house. A dirty man with a scraggle of beard limped out of the trees and came toward them leading a pair of big geldings all saddled and ready. A bay and a roan. Jake took the roan.

With a thoughtful frown Antrim mounted the other.

No money changed hands; no words were spoken. They departed at once, striking immediately north by east over a wagon road whose ruts and hoof sign ended, Antrim reckoned, at Duncan on the New Mexican border.

AT FULL dark they forded the San Simon. A silver glint marked a sickle moon; but it afforded no light and the brush reached up from either side to scratch at their thighs and elbows. A nighthawk whistled and a cooler and cooler wind whined down off the Peloncillos. The vague, shapeless blob that was gaunt Jake Gauze settled deeper into its saddle.

The wind plucked forlorn sound out of the trees. Only this, and saddle creak, vied with the interminable thud of their hoofs as the rancher led through the night at a lope. Without talk they pressed farther and faster into the dark desolation that hemmed these hills. Gauze had spoke truth when he called this a lonesome country.

The wild, earthy smell of it filled Antrim's breathing. Like an animal

newly escaped from its cage, he was savoring its rank flavor; and the pungence of it tugged at him, fingered his senses like hands on a keyboard. The call of this land was summoning him and he flung up his head sniffing hungrily, lips peeled back in a thin, queer smiling, while an excitement and an eagerness he had not known in years rushed tumultuously through him.

A wolf's cry wailed from a ridgetop thinly, one refracted note from the vast immensity of these forgotten wastes. The wind dropped and left an encroaching stillness that became uncanny—unbelievable. Antrim saw Jake Gauze peering back again, half twisted in his saddle, his face a shapeless blotch of gray against the black of these brush-clad heights.

Resentment dug its nails in him and all the distrust of his years ripped through him on a tide of rage compounded of this monstrous ride, of the man's incessant demand for speed and these covert, sneaking, backward glances. Irritation snapped his guard and he flung sharp words at Gauze uncaringly. "Never mind twistin' your head around. I'm right behind you, Mister—"

"I know damn well you are," Jake said; and appeared to consider that answer enough.

The night's thick hush closed in again; hoofs droned their song, clop clop, clop clop. Why was this Gauze so scared of his backtrail? Why had he hired the gun packer, Antrim? Was it fear that spurred his headlong travel?

Antrim began to peer round himself.

UP AHEAD somewhere, halfway to morning, the rancher stopped. When Antrim came up he'd a leg round the saddle horn, bony shoulders humped over it. "There she is," he said, pointing. "That's Skeleton, yonder."

By the moon's brightening light Antrim made out the gash, an ink black crack in the towering walls. No breath of air was stirring. There was a bodeful look about this dark crevice stealthily threading its tortuous way through the hills. Trouble-feel hung strong about it; a queer, sour stench, like the smell of blood.

As though sensing his thought the gaunt Jake grinned. "Been a mort o' men killed in there, fella. 'F it wa'n't so dark you could see Silver Greek cuttin' through this pocket—off there to the right. Used t' be a Curly Bill trail up t' Galeyville. But the' ain't no Galeyville nowadays; ain't nothin' but crumblin' walls an' some purpled piles of empty bottles. Ain't a stick o' wood left big enough t' make kindlin'—pulled it all out when they built up Paradise. Ain't nothin' but a tangle of mesquite brush now."

"What're them peaks off yonder?'

"Peloncillos—main range," Jake muttered. "Curly Bill used t' hev a ranch up there; sometime, mebbe, I'll show you the place. I'm rangin' all them mountains now. Animas Valley is off there beyond them. That's another old Curly Bill hangout; Clantons used t' hev a big spread there, too. An' a gent named Lang, an' Dick Gray. Real high-rollers, them boys. 'Twas their brashness took 'em off, like as not. An' that's a page f' your book, mister; leave smartness f' them that's big enough t' tote it."

He strayed his glance over Antrim's shoulder. "Time t' move," he said, and put his horse in motion.

Antrim paused long enough to have a look on his own hook; the gaunt Jakes nerves were catching. But all that showed were the dark blobs of foliage, the hemming brush and the far wink of stars. Just the same something scratched his mind with its warning. It was Antrim's notion they were being followed. He had neither seen anything nor heard anything but he knew, deep down inside him, there was somebody dogging their trail.

He scowled as he watched the black sway of Jake's shoulders. What was the man letting him in for? What need had sent Gauze to town for a gunslick? 'Gun slick' was what Jake took him for— or, was it?

THEY WERE traveling the depths of Skeleton Canyon.

Over there was a tree called the Outlaw's Oak, and there were gouges from bullets on many another scaley old sycamores were pocked with initials. Guy Antrim had talked with the men who had carved them. The way was paved with the bones of the dead; death and this canyon were hunkered as close as ever spilled blood could get them.

This was the trail the Mex smugglers had used in the days of Curly Bill's wild bunch. This was where Curly Bill had butchered them— had killed them like dogs for the sacks bulged with silver that burdened the backs of their mule trains. This was the Trail.

A stream's felted whisper licked soft through the gloom and Antrim, had cocked, faintly nodded. Skeleton Creek that would be; they would soon reach the place called Devil's Kitchen where the towering walls opened out for a bit.

Antrim knew these thing and many others concerning this region. The lay of this land was grim-etched in his mind; he would not have been lost with his eyes shut. Just the same he was glad Gauze had found him.

It was easy to believe old ghosts walked here.

Antrim's head came around once, startled; he had thought to hear a mule's bell tinkle, and was twisting his head for another back stare when he dismissed the impulse with a brief wry grin. It would need something faster than a mule to trail them. The bell he had heard had probably been in his head— the result of a heap too much thinking.

Right here was where the massacre had been, where nineteen Mexicans had breathed their last, had shrieked and fallen with the gore spurting out of them. One of Curly Bill's gang, it had been—Zwing Hunt, by name— who had christened the Outlaw's Oak with his blood. Struck in the shoulder by smuggler lead, he'd been carried to the tree by his pard, Billy Grounds; and there, in its shade, his bushwhacking friends had bathed and tended his hurt.

It had been Antrim's collected knowledge of Hunt that had brought him back to this country.

"Ever hear of a fella called Miguel Garcia? *Don* Miguel, they called him," Jake said, slowing down and breaking his silence. A "gold-plated dude in the ol' days. Used t' ride this trail pretty reg'lar. Had a heap plenty savvy, excep' fer one thing: He forgot," Jake chuckled, "as how the ol' colonel, Colt, had made all gents equal. Curly Bill's crowd got him; shot him down in this canyon with a mule train of silver."

"Bill clean up much?" Antrim asked him.

"I'd like t' hev it," Jake grunted, then twisted around with a quick, hard look, and thereafter kept his mouth closed.

Antrim grinned to himself as he eyed Jake's back; he guessed old Gauze knew mighty well how much Bill took from those Mexes. He had been right on tap when Garcia dropped— no farther away than that rimrock.

They rode with a furtive silence while the stars turned dim and a gray light grew above the ragged tops of the canyon walls. The walls themselves shrank farther apart and the sun, Antrim thought, was not far off.

Jake Gauze was a pretty sly article. Been about, Antrim guessed, to boast of that other raid. Back there in the Devil's Kitchen that had been just barely a month after Bill's own raid. Jim Hughes, one of Bill's lieutenants, had come rushing up from below the Line with news of a vastly richer train already enroute across the Animas Valley. But they'd told Hughes at Galeyville that Bill was away and there'd been no time to go hunting him. Catching up what men were handiest, Hughes had staged this second raid himself; a rutless coup which had netted the hidden owlhoot cache more than two hundred thousand dollars. Antrim knew of every man who'd been in it. Hughes himself, Ike and Bill Clanton, Jack McKenzie, Zwing Hunt, Milt Hicks, Billy Grounds and Jake Gauze.

Oh, yes. Jake was a cute one and no mistake; a very slick article. Extremely sly.

Around their climbing horses dark

shadows swirled, ducking and nodding and writhing till it made Antrim's head ache to watch them. And the night had grown damper with dew blown down from the mountain meadows.

A fitful wind brushed the tops of the trees—a further sign of the dawn's approach. And a nameless something got to tugging at Antrim. An urge and a need that was born of this canyon; that was stealthy sprung from its ghosts and its riddles. It was tramping his nerves and it turned him watchful.

Jake's voice rode back on a gust of the breeze. Pitched low, it was, as though he spoke to himself. "Not far," came his words. "Just a whoop an' a holler... Up yonder there where the canyon forks."

Antrim, coming suddenly against him, felt the cocked and startled stiffness of him; saw, as an opaque blob against the thinning murk, Jake's rigid shape, bleak-held in the saddle, forward bent with cocked elbow, tensely staring.

The hemming walls had widened away. There was, up ahead, what looked like a fork. There was, also, something else.

Gauze breathed an oath; and Antrim, peering at a yellow glow yonder, had his own grim wonder and his own swift thoughts. They were that way, staring, when they heard it again—a scream, and the racketing bang of a shot.

4

IDY RED

SHE WAS backed against an angle of the wall with a set, white face and a gun in her hand when she heard the hard sledging pound of hoofs.

With a flailing sweep of his outstretched hand the tall man batted the lamp into fragments.

Jake's bellowing voice hit the house like a mellet. "Strike a light!"

Kerrick drawled from the shadows, "That you, Jake?"

"Light up that lamp!"

"On the shelf by your shoulder," Idy Red said tightly.

A match burst to flame in Kerrick's cupped palm. He found the extra lamp and lit it, giving her a grin across his raised shoulder as he crossed to the table and carefully placed it where the one he had broken had erstwhile been sitting. In the opposite corner the second man, Cope, was still mouthing curses, blood-stained fingers bitterly clamped to his cheek.

Boots drove sound from the planks of the porch.

Kerrick's dropped voice said, "I'll handle this," and then Jake Gauze was a cocked, hulking shape in the black of the doorway, rage, intolerance and an edgy care all wickedly tugging him their separate ways.

But he was not surprised; Idy Red saw that instantly. She as instantly guessed he'd been expecting these strangers. Then it was she who realized there was someone behind Gauze—another strange rider, inscrutably eying them.

Jake came into the room, jaws corded with muscle, glaring eyes showing the effort he made to control himself.

"Quite a wildcat you got here," Kerrick smiled. "Right han'some, too—but you always was a good judge of lookers. How's the world been treatin' you?"

Jake stood like a man in the grip of hard choices, jammed breath making a nervous play with his shirt-front, the black, twisted scowl still tight on his cheek bones. She had never seen Gauze look so fierce mad before. The strange man behind him put his back to the doorpost, lounging there clamly, surveying them all with thumbs hooked in his gun belt.

"Well!" Kerrick said. "You might make us welcome. We've come a long piece to get eyed like the small pox.

Where you hidin' the jug at? Fetch it out an' act human."

"Idy Red," Jake said, blackly watching Kerrick, "hev these dogs mussed you?"

The girl shook her head, eyes dismissing them scornfully.

"Sure?"

The way Jake said it put a fire in her cheeks. "That runt in the co'ner kinda 'lowed he had notions, but I don't look for no more trouble from him." She tossed the hair back out of her eyes and tucked the pistol away in her belt. "Friends o' yourn, are they?"

Kerrick laughed. He was a confident, wide chested man who could stand there and consider Jake with a comfortable amusement. Even when Gauze blackly said: "Keep your skunk's paws off her—hear me?"

Unruffled, Kerrick shrugged it away with a cool, hard smiling. "Hell," he said, "get the jug an' quit growlin'. Ain't nobody goin' to bother your woman. Who's the gent by the door? Ain't met him, have I?"

But Gauze couldn't take up slack that fast. Crouched seconds longer he stood there glowering, the urge plainly in him to carry this further. Then, reluctantly, he shifted weight and, half turned, said thickly, "You'll wanta know these fellas. The long-geared drink is Bat Kerrick—cow man. That skimmer over ther hangin' onto his face mostly goes by the handle of Taiban Cope. He's a Tombstone product from away back when. This here," he said, with a hand stretched toward Antrim, "is Poker Face—new ramrod around these here localities."

ANTRIM looked them over, tipped a nod at them curtly. He had heard of Cope—a pale little worm, halfbreed son of a Mormon horse thief. He had used to travel with men like Downing, Pete Spence and Burt Alvord. He was a saddle-blanket gambler with a sideline—in the old days anyway—of touting for Crazy Horse Lil and some of the other house madams on Sixth Street.

It was Kerrick that Antrim eyed longest, though; this one was no more a cowman than the pale little Cope was. The man was a gun-slick and every gesture proclaimed it. The leather of the gun-sheath thonged to his leg was dark with much oiling and the cut of his jowls showed a gun-fighter's brashness. The strike of his stare was hard as chilled agate, in no way reflecting the quirk of his lips.

Antrim said "Howdy," and Kerrick's glance took him over from hat crown to boot-heel. He said, "I'll put up the broncs," and, tramping past Antrim, ducked his head through the doorway.

The girl crossed the room and stopped by Jake. She put a hand on his arm but it was Antrim she looked at. "Forgetting somethin', ain't you? Whyn't you tell him my name?"

"I'll tell *you* somethin'," Jake snorted. "You git to your room an' stay put there."

With a toss of her head she came over to Antrim. "I'm Idy Red," she smiled, and put out her hand. Her hair, copper red in the lamp glow, was brushed carelessly back from features piquant and vivid. Her eyes, he thought, held an odd excitement.

"Glad to know you," he said, and dropped her hand, not at all sure he liked her. He could admire the nerve she had shown in dealing with the trash Gauze's schemes had brought here; but there was a place in this world for women. Men had made it for them, and those who were proper stayed in it.

Perhaps she read his thought. Her eyes changed shade. Then, peering up into his face, she laughed. "I got to know you better."

"You git to your room!" Jake shouted, and had a bony fist lifted to clout her when something he saw in his hired man's eyes dropped the hand and his voice at the same time, startled.

He wheeled to scowl blackly after her, and when the door banged shut behind her he looked again at Antrim's face. There was nothing on it but inscrutability.

With a final hard stare Gauze went out of the room.

IT WAS lighter outside and a breeze had sprung up. But stringers of fog still clung to the scrubby box elders and moisture was a beaded shine on the waxed-satin leaves of the cottonwoods. Antrim picked up the reins of the ground-tied broncs and had his thorough look at the place.

There was a corral off yonder built of aspen poles that the broncs had gnawed clean by way of a pastime. There were eight or ten big geldings inside it; and to the left, hard against the far rock wall, was a weather tight stable also built of poles. The look of that wood told Antrim within an ace of how long Gauze had been here.

It had not been long.

Still with his schooled face taciturn, Antrim's head swung round for a look at the house. It was made of sun-cured adobes; built in the form of an open square, it had four rooms, three of which—confirming his guess—could only be entered from the patio; there were no connecting doors between them and only the main room gave onto the yard. This room was flanked by a broad veranda well riffled with dust by the play of the winds. A tall, narrow window flanked the door on each side like a couple of foot soldiers guarding royalty. Indeed, the whole place had a grim, bastioned look to it—more like a fort than where a man did his living. The hard, mud walls were nearly thirty inches thick.

There was still enough fog to hide the forks of the canyon, but a cowbird was calling from off in some thicket and high in the top of a gaunt old tree a mockingbird sang the opening bars of its day praise. The sun would soon be over the rim and Antrim was tired with his long hours of riding. Tired, but not sleepy; he had too much to think about to feel at all drowsy. Someplace, out back of the stable, Bat Kerrick was whistling.

Antrim moved toward the sound; he was close to the stable when Kerrick came round it. Self assurance was a light like humor in the pale, blue gaze Kerrick turned upon him. "Known Jake long?"

Antrim considered. "Long enough to know better."

Kerrick smiled, thinly sly. Then he chuckled; and, without remark, went off toward the house.

All the time he unsaddled the horses and was rubbing them down with handfuls of straw, Antrim thought about it. The incident still rankled while he shook down hay. After that, with a shrug, he put it away from him and turned his attention to the thing which had brought him all the long miles from Tubac. He was deep in this thinking when a shadow dimmed the doorway and his upwhipped glance found Idy Red watching him.

He said without masking his thoughts: "How'd you get here?"

"Clumb through a winder," she said with a grin.

"Then you better 'clumb' back."

"I ain't in no tearin' rush. Shucks...." Her regard held excited interest. She said, "Sure wisht I had your purty black curls," and showed her teeth in a laugh when he scowled. "You're fr'm Texas, ain't you?"

Antrim said, "Your Pap will Tex—"

"Jake Gauze ain't my Pap." She wrinkled her nose at him. "My Pap was kilt by the 'Patches—'way back. Jake's jest a-takin' keer o' me—in a manner o' speakin'," she added; and said with a lift of her shoulders: "My Pappy was 'Red Dan' Harris. No better man ever wore boots—ast Jake; *he'll* tell you! Jake says he was the fightin'est feller he ever did see....I reckon Jake's seen a plenty."

"I expect he has—"

"You bet he has! 'Course he's jest plain lazy barroom trash—"

"If you think that," Antrim said, "why stay here?"

"Well...." She shrugged her willowy shoulders again. "Jake does the best he can with me— 'cordin' to *his* lights, anyway. Ain't every feller thet would bother round with a damfool girl. We git along pretty toler'ble. Only trouble with Jake, he's so damn bossy."

Antrim found nothing to say to that. Idy Red declared pridefully: "My Pappy was a Texas man. Come

up f'm Eagle Pass, he did, with fourteen hundred Mex'can cattle." Her smile flashed out, bright, excited again. "You come f'm Texas, didn't you?"

"No."

"Well, you don't hev to take my haid off!"

Idy Red sighed. "I'd shore like t' find me a Texas man. I'm a-gittin' all-fired tired of these damn back-country brush poppers. Just think—*Eagle Pass!*" She sighed again. "I'd mighty well like t' git a look at that place—ain't it got the fetchin'est sound? Bet you it's big as....as... Well! Betcha it's bigges' place no'th o' Mexico City!"

"You been to Mexico City?"

"Jake has. Jake's been all over hell an' back. He says—"

"You better be thinkin'," remarked Antrim drily, "of what he'll be sayin' 'f he catches you out here."

HER HANDS came expressively up to her hair. She swept its red mass back from her cheeks and looked at him, observing him critically, wonderingly, her scrutiny as frankly personal as the one she'd given him in front of Jake. She said, a little exasperated, "I can't see why you don't like me."

"I like you all right—"

"You don't ack like it."

"What," Antrim frowned, "you wantin' me to do? Spark you or—"

"You better not try it!" she scowled, backing off; "I got a gun an' I can sure as hell use it."

"Humph!" Antrim snorted and went back to his work.

"I can shoot good as you can! You seen what I did t' that tinhorn, didn't you?"

Antrim continued his work like she wasn't around.

Idy Red gave sign of a temper. She kicked a horse chip across the stable. "I c'n see damn well you ain't no Texican! Texas men is polite to women—"

"I've known some that wasn't."

Idy Red stared. "Trash!" she scoffed, and sent another horse chip bouncing. "You c'n allus tell what kind a man is by the way he acks with a woman."

Antrim twisted his head and looked at her. "That been your experience?"

It brought her up stone still. Her eyes went black, and a leaping anger bleached her cheeks to the color of chuck wagon canvas. Then, astonishingly, she laughed—laughed till the tears shone bright on her lashes.

"Oh, lordy me!" she gasped at last; and laughed again at the way Antrim eyed her. "Gosh, but you are a tough one, ain't you? I bet you're one of our toughest sort—live fo'ever an' then turn into a whiteoak post. Scowl the bark plumb off'n a tree!"

Abruptly her mirth fell entirely away. There was a sudden stiffness in the set of her shoulders and the glint of her eyes was sharp as a hatchet. "What's Jake up to bringin' you out heah? You ain't no friend o' his—he ain't the kind to hev no friends. He's brung you out heah to ride herd on someone—*me,* or them owlhooters! Which one cuts it?"

5

SUNDANCE

HALF TURNED by his horse Antrim stood there while the buzz of a fly droned into the flare and fall of men's distant talking. Then he lowered the gear in his hands and faced her, made a picture of indolent, careless grace as he stood with broad shoulders brushing the stall. The bronze of his cheeks showed no sign of his thinking, but the gray of his gaze made a cool, searching scrutiny. Then he drawled, "I'm allowin', ma'am, that ain't rightly your business."

"Never mind the poker face; I'm askin' you why you've come out heah."

"And I've told you it ain't your worry."

"A lot you—" She broke off in mid-sentence; whirled toward the door. Antrim, looking over her shoulder, saw a man dismounting in the yard outside.

The man came toward them, peering into the stable. He saw them and stopped. "Your pardon. Hadn't aimed to intrude."

"Lookin' for someone?"

"Fella named Gauze. I was told—"

"Expect you'll find Gauze up at the house."

The man nodded, roved a casual glance round the stable. He had a deep-tanned face, the look of intelligence, and in a way that showed knowledge and tolerance. Too much tolerance, to Antrim's thinking. The man's look got under his temper.

But the fellow seemed not to have noticed. "I'm obliged," he said, and blandly smiled at the girl, removing his hat to show black, curling hair that had been recently trimmed and was brushed with care. He bowed with a paraded reverence that made Antrim's fists itch to bat him.

"Your servant, ma'am," he declared, strictly grave, and then gave her the flash of his quick smile again and, wheeling, turned into the yard's flood of sun.

Antrim saw Idy Red's eyes follow him, excited and wondering and filled with interest. She said, admiring his swing to the saddle. "Bet you *he* come f'om Texas! Gosh! It plumb sticks out all over 'im—*there's* a gentleman! Just like—"

"No one but fools ever gets took in by a easy smile an' a passle of store clothes."

She flung him a scornful glance and said tartly, "Blah!" and thereafter turned to watch the stranger from sight.

Antrim lifted broad shoulders in an uncaring shrug, and without remark turned through the stable's rear door and left her.

He had, then, his watchful look of the region, observing that now, with the fog departed, the trees, gently nodding in a tiny wind, looked born anew, their leaves fresh and clean, asparkle with dew.

He took his look and went into the brush, he crawled into the thorny tangle and the earth felt good to his saddle-tired body. He closed his eyes and forthwith slept.

* * *

THE SUN was a blaze behind the westward crags when Antrim opened the ranch house door and heard men's talk go abruptly still. They were all there, all four of them. Jake's look was black. "Where hev you been?"

"Sleepin'. Don't you never eat round here?"

"Openin' doors without knockin's got a mort of gents killed," Kerrick mentioned.

"You wouldn't be figurin' to pass any threats, would you?"

"Choke off the blat, you two," Jake grumbled. "Poke, shake hands with—"

"Sundance," smiled the new arrival, but did not offer to extend his hand. "What kind of ante you got in this business?"

"He's roddin' the spread," Jake told him gruffly: and Antrim said: "What's he wantin'—a job?"

"He's a guest," Jake said.

Guy Antrim looked skeptical. "You ain't got no use for a range boss, Gauze. What you're needin' is a dry nurse round here."

The saturnine Kerrick pulled up his brows. He murmured at Jake, "You ain't loadin' nobody. Any fool could guess what you hired this feller for."

Sundance said, "And we ain't impressed."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" Unease crouched plain behind Jake's bluster; a kind of grin curled Kerrick's mouth corners.

It was Taiban Cope that drove the nail. "When a gent hires a gun-fighter he's generally got reason. Either he's scared himself or he's figurin' to scare other folks.

"We don't scare worth a damn," Bat Kerrick grinned.

There was a film of sweat on Jake's bony face.

"How much have you offered him?" Sundance asked.

"I ain't offered him nothin' but the wage he's hired for—"

"An' how much is that?"

"It ain't none of your business," Antrim said.

"Oho!" Kerrick jeered. "So the Sphinx can talk."

There rose in Antrim an urge toward violence, but no change disturbed his dark, baked cheeks. He held himself ready for whatever might come, and his watchful glance absorbed all significance as he said, very softly, "he can do other things, too; they might surprise you more."

"They might, for a fact." Sundance said it coolly, and wheeled his probing look back at Jake. "Get rid of this fellow if you want to stay healthy; get rid of him tonight or he'll be got rid of for you."

He got up to go out and the rest of them followed him.

Antrim's arm blocked the door. "Just a minute, mister. Let's get this straight. Is that a promise you made or just conversation?"

Sundance stopped and showed his teeth.

"It's just conversation—so far."

"Which owns this spread? You or Jake?"

"Jake owns the spread—"

"Then I'll be takin' my orders from Jake—not you."

Sundance chuckled with a casual politeness. "Every goose to its gander—"

Antrim's hand on his sleeve pulled the big man round. "What's that?"

"Just an old Sundance saying," answered Sundance coolly. 'You're pretty damn touchy for a young fellow, ain't you? That's the trouble with you gunslicks—always on the prod. That's what gets so many of you killed."

ANTRIM smiled back at him, grin for grin. "We might make a deal."

"Not this time, bucko; there's enough in this now."

"I might be in it whether you like it or not."

"Not long."

"If that's your notion, why not settle it now? Three to one should be odds enough for you."

"When I get the notion I don't wait on odds."

"What's a man need to get you into the notion?"

Sundance smiled, very suave, urbanely. "I came here for a rest—"

"*What* rest?" Antrim jeered. "You mean the rest of that *map* Zwing Hunt passed on?"

Sundance's face didn't change, but his eyes did. A stillness settled that was tight and brittle. Brittle, almost, as the cant of their postures. In that frozen quiet a door was shut someplace, but in this room there was no sound, no movement. The feel of the place turned thick with thinking. "So the son told you!" Kerrick growled at last. He thrust an intolerant hand through his hair and his shoulders lowered...like the creep of a shadow. Jake's stertorous breathing was perceptibly noisier and the gambling man, Cope, nervously fingered his collar.

Some reluctant urge got to knotting Jake's muscles and the wish to be elsewhere was bright in Cope's stare when Kerrick, scraping a chair from his path, growled, "I reckon—"

It was then Antrim's laugh crossed his words like a file. "You ain't got enough savvy to reckon, Kerrick; all we're needin' to make this gatherin' complete is Virgil Boucher—or the ghost of that Mex."

Jake's jaw went slack and dropped wide open. Kerrick stopped in his tracks like a shot had struck him, and the gambler's eyes bugged out like saucers. Only Sundance had the wit to chuckle. The chuckle broke into full-fledged laughter and he clapped Kerrick's shoulder till the tall man, cursing, backed out of his reach.

With the mirth still shaking his voice, Sundance said, "You're a rare one, friend—where the hell did Jake find you?"

"Mebbe," Antrim said, "it was me found Jake. Whichever the way, you better count me in this—"

"You Boucher's pardner?"

"The only pardner I need is packed right here." Antrim touched his holster with dark suggestion. "A reliable one, an' plenty efficient. Just remember that, Sundance, when you start gettin' notions."

ANTRIM, turning his back on them, left them staring; left them prey to distrust and suspicion; left each warped soul to its own acid. Lone wolves, each and every one of them, he could guess quite well what had brought this crew to foregather at Jake's—the selfsame lure that had brought himself to return to this country after all the time he had spent away from it.

A cool three million in buried loot.

Hid away in his hatband was the map he had mentioned, the one drawn by Hunt and given to Hunt's uncle. That map had been made by Zwing Hunt on his deathbed; Antrim had all of it but one tiny corner; they could have that, and welcome. He was playing this hand for something else entirely, and the chance seemed good that he would find it here. These others were pinning their hopes on gaunt Jake Gauze; figuring, no doubt, that he had the map. But it seemed certain to Antrim that Gauze, if he'd known where the treasure was hid, would have dug it up long ago.

Perhaps he had, but Antrim did not think so.

Four years, he mused as he strode toward the stable, was a passle of time out of any man's life. But what were four years against three million dollars in owlhoot gold, with a sprinkling of silver thrown in for good measure? Gold and silver, some currency too, and a box full of baubles.

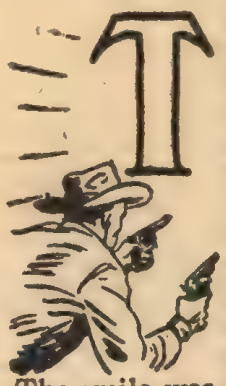
Well worth the time he had spent chasing clues, the time he had spent *gabbing* round with old-timers. He had talked with Hunt's uncle in far-off Santone; with others, much closer. He had knocked around for a hand's span of weeks with Virgil Boucher, who was by way of being an older brother of the dead Billy Grounds.

When he'd made his map, Hunt had issued instructions, on a separate paper. Virgil Boucher had had it—but not when with Antrim. Someone else had got it. "Stole it, by Gawd." Boucher growled, "from my pocket!"

Antrim lifted his saddle, heaved it onto a horse. While his lean hands were busy making ready to ride, his thoughts harked back to the tale Hunt had told as he lay abed dying.

6

"YOU AIN'T GOT MUCH CHOICE"



THE RANCH house was still tight, bitter silence till the ring of Guy's spurs quit the yonder porch planking. Then Kerrick's lips parted in an explosive curse and three pairs of eyes raked Jake intollerantly.

The smile was gone off Sundance's lips.

It was Kerrick who said with the spleen almost choking him: "You hound-yellow son!" and came out of the corner like a lunging cat. Jake threw out both hands to ward him off; but his bony shoulders were jammed to the wall and the wall wouldn't give and Kerrick, eyes glinting, came in for the kill.

Jake Gauze showed his age. He was an old man, cringing; It was Sundance who kept Kerrick off him.

"There's a good-sized chance," drawled Sundance softly, "it wasn't old Jake tipped this leather-slapper off."

"Wasn't Jake!" Kerrick snarled. "Who you think done it—Santa Claus? Who the hell else would have anything t' tell him?"

"We'll be learning that presently. What all do you know about this pelican, Jake?"

Jake roused himself. "Not a thing," he declared— "not a damn thing. I picked 'im up over at Tombstone t' he'p me—"

"Help you what?" Cope scoffed. "Help you count yer chickens?"

Some of the gray seeped out of Jake's cheeks and the swerve of his eyes went slyly crafty. "To he'p me round the place," he said. "I been hevin' trouble—been losin' stock—a right damn good passle of it. Some

o' them oilers f'm below the line 've taken t' usin' the Trail ag'in. Hosses, I reckon. Way I read the sign, they're bringin' broncs up f'm outa Sonora, palmin' 'em off on them ranchers round Tucson: stealin' more there an' driftin' it back—"

"What's all that got t' do with—"

"Tellin' you, ain't I? I took on this fella—"

"When?" Sundance asked.

Jake said glibly: "Four-five weeks ago."

Cope showed a gambler's brow-raised skepticism. "A real hog fer work, ain't he?"

Didn't you know," Kerrick growled sarcastically, "Jake keeps his stock corraled on the porch here?"

Sundance cleared his throat. " 'Poker Face' all the handle he give you?"

"He can eat jest as much by thet name as another. Anyhow," Jake said, attempting virtue, "I ain't the kind t' go diggin' my nose—"

Kerrick's remark was obscene and lively. "To hell with your nose! This damn gabbin' makes my gut ache. This baloney's too wise—we got to get rid of him. 'F you'd had the wit to keep your trap shut—"

"I kep' it shut!" Jake flared fiercely glowering. Sidelong his badgered stare flicked Sundance.

BUTTER-SMOOTH and bland, big Sundance said, "Bein's I wasn't sent no personal invite to this jamboree, I ain't rightly entitled to do no talking. But it seems to me—"

"What *I* say," Kerrick cut in curtly, "let me get my sights lined up on a sidewinder—"

"After a sidewinder's bitten you," Sundance smiled, "blowin' its head off won't help you any."

"It would make me *feel* a damn sight better! Jake's spilled his guts to him, an' I say by Gawd—"

"By Gawdin' ain't like to help you much, either." Sundance looked at the other men tolerantly. "You birds should be glad I'm willing to help you; left to your own poor wits you'd wizzle. Since this Jasper knows so much he's probably *got* that map.... It could be," he said, and Kerrick's jaw tightened.

"Nobody's asked for your help that I know of. You hogged in here just like this other guy—"

"Not *just* like this other guy," Sundance grinned. "You wrote me yourself there was something big cookin' here. If you hadn't said that I'd never thought to of come here—I never would of guessed old Jake had a spread here; I'm obliged to you, Batwick—"

"Don't call me that damn name!" Kerrick snarled. "An' don't try makin' out *I* ast you into this. I'd of cut off my tongue—"

"I'll bet you would, at that—Jake, too," Sundance chuckled. "Well, it's a damn ugly wind that blows nobody good. I'm satisfied, and you fellows ought to be; it ain't every bunch has a talent like mine. If I hadn't bought in, this here Poker Face gent would of had you stole blind in no time. If I had my rights I'd get the biggest share, because without my help you wouldn't get so much as the price of one drink; this Poker Face gent would of glommed the whole of it. Not," he grinned, "that I'm askin' that much. I wouldn't dream of it. I'll take my share and thank you kindly—"

"You'll take what you get an' keep your mouth shut!"

Sundance shook his black curls as though dismayed at Kerrick. "Harsh words," he said, "never buttered no parsnips. Well, Jake," he drawled, "let's have the truth of it. Did you ask this guy in?"

Jake juned around like the seam-squirrels had him. He could not seem to hold his eyes on Sundance; they frittered around like a harried heel fly.

He mopped his face with the back of a sleeve. "You've made up yer mind—the' ain't no use o' *me* talkin'. The' wouldn't none o' you believe me—"

"We're willin' to listen."

Jake scowled, swallowed hard, rasped a hand through his bristles. He edged a quick look over Sundance covertly, took a deep breath and plunged in bodily. "Like I said," he

whined, "I been losin' stock—not no two or three critters like a man might expect to, but great jags of stock—it's fair got me rattled. I seen I had t' hev he'p. So I got up a hoss an' went over t' Tombstone. I was in the *Palace* chinnin' with Slaughter—"

"The sheriff!" Cope swore. "By—"

"Hang hold," Sundance grunted. "Let's hear the rest of it."

Jake didn't seem to know where he was at, hardly. He was palpably scared of the burly Sundance; you would almost have said he was scared of his shadow. His next words were pitched in a plaintive whine, an incongruous blend of pleading, resentment and surly defiance.

"You mus' think cowpunchers grows aroun' here on trees! I *had* t' ast Slaughter. I'd awready ast all the rest of them sons. Besides, that chisel-faced hyena was standin' right there by the bar when I come in. Y' expeck me t' pass 'im up like a dishrag? Folks don't pass John Slaughter up—*no ways*. He been sniffin' my tracks fer quite a spell an' this looked like a firs' class chanct t' smooth his fur down. So I—"

"Well, go *on,*" Kerrick snarled. "What the hell are you waitin' on?"

Jake spat back at him. "Man's got t' ketch 'is breath *sometime,* ain't he?"

"Never mind him, Jake," soothed Sundance, "he wouldn't know a gnat's heel from a hole in the ground. How you reckon this guy got onto you?"

JAKE LOOKED baffled. "It's got me fightin' my hat," he grunted. "Alls I know is what I done tol' you. I ast him was he huntin' a job—somebody pointed him out when I was jawin' with Slaughter. He sure didn't show much interested. Had t' exercise my talkin' talents fer up'ards of a hour 'fore I finally angured him into takin' my money. How the hell'd *I* know—"

"Sure," Sundance nodded; "how would anyone?" But Cope said darkly:

"Lay you ten to one he's a star-packer."

"Who—*me!*" Jake flared; and Kerrick's lip curled.

"Nobody's ever take *you* for a tin-badge!"

"No," Sundance said, "this Poker Face ain't no lawman; there's somethin' else back of him crowdin' this play."

"Don't keep it so secret," Kerrick jeered.

Sundance's black eyes jabbed up a twinkle. "I'm no oracle, but I can tell you this—it ain't nothing that can't be fixed by a forty-five barrel on a forty-four frame."

In his mind he applied the same thought to Kerrick, and there was a pretty good chance Bat Kerrick sensed it. "Better get up damn early if you try it." His angular eyes jabbed Sundance brashly, then he swung his look on old Jake again. "If you got me an' Cope out here on a goose chase—"

"You don't think," Jake blustered; and Sundance chuckled.

"Called, by grab! An' first pop out of the box, at that!"

Kerrick's cold jaw came around like a yard arm. His squinched-up eyes were bright and ugly. But he made no remark; he didn't say anything till he brought his look back to Jake again. "You said," he told Jake, "if we all joined up and put our cards on the table we'd find that stuff—"

"You aint put no cards on the table."

"I ain't seen no reason to," Kerrick growled; "an I sure ain't puttin' down nothin' fer *that* guy! You said we was goin' to divvy this equal—"

Jake said, "I'm still willin'."

"You ain't got much choice," allowed Sundance, smiling; you ain't got no more choice than Batwick here."

Again Kerrick's stare came round at Sundance. His cheeks swelled out like a grassfed bronc, but he kept the hatch on his temper doggedly.

Cope said to Jake, "You was one of the jaspers that helped Curly Bill pile up that plunder—you was one of Curly's right-hand men. Why split with us—why ask us in here?"

"Probably couldn't find it on his own hook," said Sundance.

"But he said—"

"Old Jake's said a lot of things besides his prayers."

Sundance's low, scoffing words wilted Jake like a sunstroke. They drained all the health from his cheeks; left him shaking. It was startling what effect Sundance had on the man. His slightest sarcasm worked on Jake like an acid; yet this time they pulled a protest out of him. He seemed to feel the need of justification. "I never said I knowed where it *was!* Alls I said—"

"You said you knew," Kerrick gritted, "where that 'Davis Mountain' was—"

"I never!" yelled Jake. "I said I knowed where the mountain was—but I never put no name to it! I—"

"You said," Cope snarled, "all you was needin' was the map! or directions—"

"Sure! When I see your directions—"

Sundance drawled, butter-smooth: "We'll have us a look at your mountain, first. Come along. Point it out an' we'll get down to cases."

7

THE CURLY BILL HOARD

THERE were many things about these men that Antrim could neither guess nor fathom, but of one thing he felt wickedly sure: lure of the Curly Bill Cache had drawn them over the desert miles to this Skeleton Canyon ranch of Jake's. They were here for the same reason he was—to unearth that blood-money plunder that was somewhere hidden in these roundabout hills. Hard cash and smugglers' gold and silver—only the Lord knew how much of the latter, but in Hughes' haul alone there'd been over ninety thousand Mexican dollars and thirty-nine bars of solid gold. Zwing Hunt and his raiders had crossed the Border with two four-horse wagons piled high with loot they had gutted a bank at Monterey of two big gunnysacks crammed with money and a fifty-cigar box stuffed with diamonds. They had sacked Matamoras and raped the cathedral of its golden statues. Besides all this there was the plunder of bullion Curly Bill had taken from the nineteen Mexicans his gang had slaughtered right here in this canyon eight years ago.

In all, three cool million; if you were one to believe rumor.

Guy Antrim wasn't, but he knew in his bones there was treasure here. Scoff as you would, there was no getting round the bleached bones in this canyon. Everywhere they littered the trail, human bones and the remains of dead mules. Plenty of gents had found hide aparejos, twisted and cracked from sun and rain; more than a few had found Mexican dollars. Ranch hands, round the San Simon, had played all one winter with dinero picked out of the brush of this country, and even so recent as just last year a number of tarnished old coins had been found.

A good many people had prowled through this canyon, covertly searching for Curly Bill's cache. Some had come with divining rods, others had come from bent old dames who bragged of second sight and witchery. Medicine men had garnered fortunes telling damned fools just where they could find it. Several had come sporting wands of willow as though the loot would bend them like a source of water. Even the spirits had been consulted; and one old codger had sworn up and down he could have put his finger right smack on it if that damned quake hadn't shaken the country. That temblor of '86, he'd meant.

But Antrim was wasting no worry on temblors; in his bones he was sure there'd been little change. This country was pretty much as the outlaws had left it. Sand might have drifted out some of its contours, winds and spring freshets might have cut a few trees away; but in the main, he guessed, if you had the right slant on it, you'd be finding Hunt's mark-

ers just about where Hunt said you would. Where Zwing Hunt's hand had drawn them on that piece of cheap writing paper.

Antrim's desire to uncover this plunder had never been crossed by any questions of ethics. Past experience had not been such as to endow his thoughts with high regard of virtue; he had his ideals but no hope of encountering them. There was a sadness in him—a consuming bitterness, but he'd at last learned to take the world just as he found it.

There had been a time when he'd looked on his fellows with warmth and tolerance, when he'd deliberately sought to find things good in them, blinding himself to their faults and their avarice; but that had been prior to the Benson stage. Prior to his acquaintance with the Tombstone jail. Luther King he'd been called in those carefree days.

He was Guy Antrim now, the frozen-faced gun-packer. A man without friends, without trust, all the dross was burned out of him, purged by experience, He was no longer fooled by men's cunning ways; no longer deceived by their shows and false sympathies. Nothing they did could further surprise him. He could see through every parade of goodness—see the rotten core behind it. His first keen look could observe their guilt, and nothing they might thereafter strive could effect his opinion by one iota.

Yet no one could truthfully call him unjust. He took care to be fair, it was his pride to be honest. He had told himself this many times, and believed it.

* * *

"WE COME up out of Mexico," Zwing had told his uncle, "with two four-horses wagons loaded with plunder. We'd been down there, raidin', for about three months. There was twenty-nine of us to start with—twenty-nine when we went through the San Luis Pass, but there was only eighteen crossed the Border back, an' some of them was bad wounded. In Monterey Billy Grounds an' me held the mob back while the rest cleaned the b a n k out—I'm tellin' you this because it's got a bearin'. We got two big gunny-sacks stuffed with money and a wood cigar box filled with diamonds. We sacked Matamoras—got two big statues. We hauled the whole works to Davis Mountain."

Hunt had paused for a bit. "Like he was collecting his thoughts," his uncle said. "Or mebbe it was just plain pain that stopped him—Lord knows there was plenty of that to his dyin'."

Zwing hadn't stopped long; he hadn't long to stop. "One of the boys," he said, "who got shot at Monterey, gasped his last when we come to the mountain. We buried him there, by the spring, in the shade of a juniper. We'd give him his share—in gold. He'd earned it; he worked like a slave for that five hundred, so we let him keep it—buried it with him. It's in a can at the head of his grave.

"We all took a bath in the waterhall then. After a while we played some poker in a cave we found. Mighty slick hideout we h a d up there. You could hunt forever an' never find it, less'n you had a map or somethin'. An' hard to get at without bein' spotted. Up there on the mountain, with a pair of glasses, you could look out plumb across to N' Mexico."

There'd been a number of other things Zwing had said, but Zwing Hunt's uncle seemed to have got them all scrambled. "Main thing is I got him some paper and he wrote down instructions—mighty particular, too; very definite. So many paces this way and that. Sorry I've lost it—but I've still got the map. There's been some tough gents camped around my place here; I've had to use my wits to get myself shut of 'em. But I've still got the map—just think of it, boy! Three million dollars!"

* * *

Antrim had thought of it; a lot of others had, too. In especial these fellows that were bulldozing Jake.

Head bent, Antrim stood in the gloom of the stable, considering ways and means. Probing chances. There was part of a frown across his cheeks;

but he straightened finally with a thin little grin.

He readied his horse; led it into the yard.

He was in the saddle, coolly twisting a smoke, when his ears picked up the faint *clop* of hoof sound.

He stayed where he was and continued his thinking.

"First," Zwing had said, "you go to Davis Mountain. Then head west. In a mile or so you'll come to a canyon—pretty fair-sized one. The west wall of this gulch is solid rock. You'll hear the creek; it boils down over a ten foot ledge. You'll likewise see, along this west wall, a good sized juniper; Silver Spring'll be right alongside of it. Be a grave there, too—there's stone slabs markin' the head an' foot of it. From the spring go south about a mile an' three tenths. You'll find another seep—we called it Gum Spring. There'll be a passle of brush on the canyon floor but, somewhere between these two holes, you'll find what's left of the wagon we burned. Iron work still ought to be there anyhow.

"About there, and between the two springs, you'll notice the west wall of the canyon sort of gouges out. Makes a kind of cove, you'll notice. At the deepest point of this cove, a pace or two out from the wall, you'll see a straight up-an'-down rock. It's three feet high, shaped square—not over a scant foot thick. We cut a pair of crosses in it, one over the other. When you find this, stand there an' face Davis Mountain. Step east twenty paces. You'll be right in line, north an' south, between them two springs. You're bound to see the wreck of that wagon. Be dead ahead. Right there's where you want to start diggin'. There'll be three million dollars right under your feet."

Just as plain as plowed ground.

Zwing had put his instructions just as lucid as that. Billy Grounds, his pardner, had died too sudden to do any talking. But there was Maggie Clinger, Grounds' sister, an emphatic believer in Zwing's famous story. Mrs. Clinger said, "I'm as sure about that treasure as if I'd been right there when they buried it. I can see them two springs, that rock with two crosses and all the rest of it just as plain as if I'd been there helpin' I could walk straight up to that buried treasure—if," she declared, "somebody would only find me that mountain."

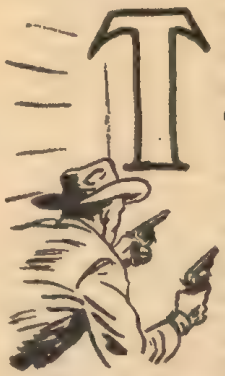
There were a great many other folks the same way. That *if* was the hell of it. It had stumped the whole crowd of them. You could stick a shovel into the cache yourself if only you could sight that gunslick mountain.

According to Zwing's uncle's account of Zwing's story it was a "rounded, bald, granite sugarloaf" type. But the men elected to map Arizona had left Davis Mountain clear out of the picture. And Zwing, droll fellow, had put down every slightest detail but the all-important mountain's location. Boucher had called him a bloody fool—and worse. "By grab," he'd told Antrim, "it's around yere someplace! There ain't such a hell's smear of mountains around yere you can look clean into New Mexico off'n. 'F I con't do no better I'll comb ever' one of 'em!"

Well, he'd combed them, Antrim sourly reflected, but he hadn't uncovered the Curly Bill hoard.

8

I KIN SHOW YOU THE GOLD!



THE SHANK of evening had blown around with the cool down-draft flowing off the mountains. The distant crags of these tumbled hills showed silver and blue in the moon's pale light as Antrim pinched out his smoke and dropped it.

He did not pick up his reins, or touch them, but got out of the saddle and stood there, silent.

The horse he had heard was close—arriving. From the San Simon Valley. He made out the animal's shape; its

rider. He was mildly astonished by what his eyes told him.

Antrim stepped up into his saddle again, got out his pipe and filled it, thoughtfully. He flexed his knees and the horse moved forward.

She saw him coming. Where the brush narrowed in, almost choking the trail, she stopped, deliberately, obviously waiting. Antrim had his moment of wonder then. He stopped beside her and she laughed at him, softly. The thin slice of moon threw its light full across her, bringing out the lush curves, the easy grace of her body.

She was lithe and slim and without a hat. Black hair framed her oval face like a picture. Red lips, parting, disclosed a shine of teeth. There was something quick and alive in her posture, something vibrant, unexplainably provocative that, against his will, came to stir and unsettle him.

She laughed again, a silvern tinkle of sound. "Hel-lo!" she exclaimed, and leaned closer, studying him, the sound of her breathing excited and quickened. She was Spanish, he guessed—at least she had Spanish features.

He touched his hat. "You lookin' for somebody?"

The shake of her head set gold earloops dancing; she appeared to eye him more closely, her interest turned personal, frankly appraising.

Antrim stirred in his saddle. "You mus' be the one that called John Slaughter 'Tex'," she smiled. "I 'ave hear of that. Not many make bold to call that one 'Tex'."

"Kind of off your range, ain't you?"

He saw the flash of her eyes and said grimly: "I called John Slaughter 'Tex' in Tombstone."

Her soft laugh approved him. It was intimate, friendly. "Oh! but you are curious—no? You are wonder who is this—this hussy w'at ride through the night sen strange places. Where does she come from—to where does she go—"

"Not at all," Antrim said. "That ain't none of my never-mind."

HE TOUCHED his hat with a brief civility, and would have picked up his reins but her hand forestalled him. Just the tips of her fingers, barely brushing his arm, yet a gun being cocked would not have stiffened him more swiftly. "You are the brave one," she said, "to go to work for Jake Gauze."

He did not ask her why that made him brave. He was held by the look of her eyes; long lashed, black, like her hair they were—black as midnight; intensely expressive. "I mus' tell you. . .I am Lolita. . .Lolita Garcia—That means nothing to you? You do not know me then?"

She seemed a little surprised. Her earloops danced impatiently. "No matter. I am a dancer. Used to work for Big Minnie when Joe ran the *Bird Cage*—you know; the opera at Tombstone."

He listened more to the warm, rich tones of her voice than to those things her words might have conjured for him. He could guess her class; it was there to be read in every bold, reckless line of her. Yet there was a fineness about her, a something beyond and above this mere bait of adventure; some thing quickly sensed but too vague to pin down.

He eyed her more closely, observing the fit of her divided riding skirt, observing the strain of the silk at her breast, and grew suddenly conscious of her heightened color. Yet her look did not falter. Neither was it bold. "This concerns me, Madame?"

She returned his glance with one completely as searching. "Does one ever divine what concerns another? I mean—truly? It *could* concern y o u. Many have found my words of import."

"Yeah? And what gives you the notion—"

"A man like you would not come out here for the sake of the wage Jake Gauze might have promised."

Antrim looked at her carefully. "For a dancer," he said, "you sure—"

"Don't forget," s h e reminded, "I used to work for Big Minnie..."

Another second he started. Something quick and surprised recolored his glance then. "Lizette!"

"Sure—the 'Flying Nymph'," she laughed softly. "Did you think any

woman could ever forget the boy Johnny Behan dragged in to play goat for the Benson Stage robbery? I was there when they locked you up, I—"

"Don't use that name here," Antrim said. "I don't know you; we never laid eyes on each other before. Do you get it?"

Her smile showed excitement. "So it *does* concern you! And I called the turn on Jake and his wages. Don't worry. I'll keep—"

The opening squeak of the house door stopped her. A man came out, striding off through the shadows, the clank of his spurs setting up little echoes that eddied and died in the brush round the stable. They could hear him swearing off there at the horses.

The girl looked a question. Antrim said, "Bat Kerrick. One of Jake's little playmates. Makes me feel kinda sorry for that girl of his. There's three of 'em camped here, and—"

He broke off to stare at the shadow-blocked doorway. Two more black figures were coming out.

He said, curtly short: "You better be lettin' 'em know you're around here," and without further words put his horse through the chaparral.

* * *

SUNDANCE'S TONE had not admitted of argument when he told Jake Gauze to show them the mountain. But Jake was of that breed of men turned balky and stubborn by the lash of pressure. "Now?" he asked. "What do you take me for—a damn *owl?*"

"An owl," mentioned Sundance, "is supposed to be smart. No...I'd never take you for an owl, friend Jake. Your conniving ways more resemble the magpie—"

"He's goin' to be a dead doornail—"

"You can't see no mountains in the middle of the night!"

"You don't know us, Jake; we can see lots of things a man wouldn't think for. We can see plain enough what you got up your sleeve. Better forget it, son, an'—"

"Damned if I know what t' make of you fellas. A guy would think," Jake blustered, "I was tryin' t' *steal* somethin' off you stead of workin' my tail off t' do you a favor! 'F you're s' damn' suspicious—"

"Easy, son...easy," murmured Sundance quietly. "Don't bank too high on the strength of that mountain. It might let you down. If it comes to trusting, I ain't trusting no one. You can have till morning to mull it over—"

It was then Bat Kerrick got up and stamped out.

Sundance's glance never left Jake's face; the gray look clawed Gauze's cheeks again. He had known all along they would get to this finally. It was the most ticklish spot in his well rehearsed plan—the plan that was back of his hiring Antrim.

The look of Sundance made Jake's scalp crawl. He sat rigidly still in his wall anchored chair, decided reluctantly to tell the truth—or such part of it, leastways, as might best serve him.

He said, with as much indignation as he thought he dared show them, "You boys got no call t' be eyin' me that way. You oughta remember I'm a man keeps his promise. Told you I'd he'p you find that cache an' I'm goin' to—if you'll give me a chance. 'F I'd knowed fer sure where the stuff was hid I'd not be stuck in these hills herdin' cattle. Bat called the turn on that, all right; but I can he'p you—*plenty*. It was Grounds an' Zwing Hunt ackshully done the hidin', but they learned all they knowed of this country from me—"

"Is that your help?" Cope asked sarcastically. He bent and brought up a knife from his boot, suggestively tried it on the flat of a thumb.

The wrinkled skin of Jake's hollowed cheeks showed a change of contour and the way of his thought winked out of his stare. He took a nervous swallow and tried again. "Now wait—don't do nothin' brash. I can savvy things makes me look like a liar, but it's Gawd's own truth I'm a-tellin' you—Gawd's own, believe me. All workin' t'gether we're *bound* t' find it. I got a real lead on it jest this week—I...I found that ju-

niper...where they buried that fella —'member? His share of the swag come t' five hundred dollars. He'd worked s' hard fer it they let 'im keep it—buried it with him. At the head of 'is grave. In a little tin..."

Jake gauged aright the looks they gave him. Saw Cope begin fiddling with his knife again. His neck sank into his bony, hunched shoulders and a wildness boiled up into his eyes. He raised a shaking, blue-veined hand. "Wait—"

"Just hand me that knife, Cope," Sundance said.

Jake lurched to his feet. "Damn you—*listen!* I *dug up* that can—I kin show you the *gold!*"

9

BEHIND THE BRUSH

WHEN ANTRIM left the girl he had no definite purpose, no mapped-out move in mind. His head was full of questions, not the least of which was puzzlement over what had brought Lizette here. Had she, too, come attracted by the pull of that owlhoot cache?

Lizette....Been a long time since he'd seen her—eight years ago, come grass. She'd been at the jail when they brought him in for the Benson stage job; this was the extent of their acquaintance.

He recalled the stricken, white face of her as she'd shrunk back to let him pass, that day—the wide and startled depth of her glance. She'd changed, though not so much as you'd think for; he'd always imagined her kind aged early. But Lizette hadn't aged; leastways her look and the shape of her hadn't. Kind of odd, when you stopped to think of it; time must have used her kindly.

He got to wondering instead about Jake's visitors, those hard-faced rannies from hell knew where. The tall and saturnine Kerrick; the pale little tinhorn, Taiban Cope; the coolly casual, smart eyed Sundance, who'd been so quick to supply a name when Jake had been passing out knockdowns. What was the connection between them and Jake?

He thought again of Sundance, so obviously a leader, a smiling man who dressed like a dude and affected grand manners; it had Antrim stumped; he admitted it. There was something about the man that bothered him, but he could not pin it down, could not fasten a name to it. The sum total of his convictions was that Sundance warranted watching.

Antrim's horse had not stopped for these jaundiced reflections. When he finally shelved his thinking they were far up the canyon, well away from all sight and hearing of Jake's place. The gorge hereabouts wore a quite different aspect. Its red walls dipped lower, were more open, less rugged. The undulant floor was a carpet of wild flowers through which the trail meandered with an easy pleasantry. For some, the place might have held rare beauty; Antrim's interest lay in hideouts for treasure.

There were plenty of mountains cutting the skyline; he could see their escarpments, pale and vague in the moon glow. Lofty peaks and crenelated hogbacks, wind scoured crags and sheer-lipped cliffsides. In all this waste of upthrust stone, who could tell where the fools had hidden it? Who could say which of these was the mountain? this was the place; but which was the mountain? That gunslick mountain Zwing Hunt had called Davis? There'd been times when Antrim was mightily tempted to believe the whole thing a cooked-up myth. But there was no gain saying the bones men had found here; folks had died here right enough. Most of the bones were gone now, washed away by the creek's flooding waters; but many a San Simon rancher washed his hands with soap that was kept in a skull—skulls their ranch hands had picked up here.

THIS WAS the trail down which eight years ago black-eyed, jovial Don Miguel had led his hard-faced smugglers from out of the Animas Valley with their belled mules daintily picking their way under bulging aparejos of Mexican silver bound north through the waving San Simon grasses, around the Cherrycows and through Dragoon Gap, across the San Pedro and up the Santa Cruz Valley to Tuscon. There they would buy all manner of things while the Tucson merchants praised their ingenuity and winked at their smartness in avoiding the customs. They would have, that is, if the Don had got through. Which he hadn't; he had died right here, with his boots on.

Only one of his company had gotten away—a handsome youth, lithe and fleet as an antelope. He had raced away in wild flight up the canyon and later—one month, so they told you—had come back with companions and lifted five hundred head of good cattle from Clanton and other Las Animas ranchers. But Curly Bill caught them in the San Luis Pass, recovered the cattle and killed half their number. He did not, however, get his hands on the leader, this same young buck who had slipped him at Skeleton. Since then many stories had gone the rounds of a solitary horseman who haunted the Border and scanned every wayfarer using the Trail.

Old Man Clanton, freshening up his chew, allowed one day he had beef to be marketed. Experience told him he'd do best at Tombstone where they paid good prices and were not too particular. Harry Ernshaw and Snow, Dick Gray, Billy Lang and Jim Crane saddled up and were with him when he started the drive—Antrim had taken pains to ascertain because this same Jim Crane was one of the men who'd jumped the Benson stage that time.

The Mexicans caught them in Guadalupe Canyon. Of the Clanton crowd only Ernshaw escaped and led the Cloverdale boys back to pick up the bodies. This revenge seemed to have satisfied Don Miguel's survivor; the solitary horseman was seen no more.

Just the same, Antrim mused, a lot of queer things had been happening since. Of the men concerned in the Skeleton massacre, few had lived long or pleasureably after. So far as was known Jake Gauze was the last; hard luck and the devil dogged the rest to the end.

It was no great wonder when you stopped to consider it that old Jake Gauze felt the need of a gun packer.

THE NICKER of a horse pulled Antrim up. Sharp and sudden it stopped him, tensely cocked in the saddle. A damp, earthy smell came out of the tree line behind which the creek ran with increased loudness.

Antrim's horse blew out a gusty breath; Antrim's hand clamped down before he could answer. The sound of the creek became plainer and plainer and the horse, off yonder, softly nickered again.

An empty camp. Antrim's shoulders relaxed and his cheeks lost their tautness. He had thought at first this might be some of the horse-running brotherhood. In such case, however, that horse off yonder would not have nickered again; it was not compatable with thieves to advertise.

He started forward then stopped, at a loss for direction. The call seemed to come from beyond the creek; yet this could not be, for the gulch wall here rose directly behind it. He must have been tricked by some distortion of echo.

Antrim rolled up a smoke and then dropped it, unlighted. There might, of course, be a cave back there. This willow growth flanking the creek might conceal it...Hunt had mentioned a cave where the bunch had played poker; but the cave in Hunt's story had been up on the mountain. There was no mountain here. None, that is, in this canyon.

He lifted his pistol out of leather and urged his horse at the dark line of trees. Shadows closed around him; branches brushed him; then his horse skittered down the low bank to the creek bed.

It was blacker than hell on holiday

here. The creek was shallow, firmly floored with rock; it made a great play with his clattering hoof sound. He was cursing himself for a fool, turning back, when the unseen horse abruptly whinnied again—right in his ears it almost seemed; and he stopped, arrested, baffled, uneasy.

He turned narrowed eyes to the far bank, raking it. There was little to see in this moonless murk, just blackness on blackness, and yet—he urged his horse nearer with flexing knees. The far bank loomed close. Less than three yards away it confirmed Antrim's impression; there was brush growing along it. Which was odd. Unless there were a ledge or outcrop holding the creek from the canyon wall.

There was, he found—and not of sandstone, either. The bank was heavy loam, and there were hoofmarks in it. By the match he had struck he could see them plainly. They were not very old. There'd been no effort to conceal them. They went directly into the brush before him.

The match flickered out and he struck another, snapping it to flame on the edge of his thumbnail, peering upward above the tops of the brush, endeavoring to locate the gulch wall behind it.

It was there, all right, rough contour showing plainly. He was that way, staring, when the match left his hand.

The sound of that shot ripped the night wide open.

10

SOLD SHORT

ANTRIM stood completely still.

The sound of the shot hit the canyon walls, bounded off and clattered away in the darkness. A risen wind clouted into the willows, and still he remained there, head canted, listening. With a sudden, brash spin of his weight he whirled, took one swift backward step and crouched, the pistol gripped in his fist again.

A dry stick snapped, and near the trail he heard brush break before a traveling body. Flame leapt out of his gun like a snake's head, for a second the runner's pace was blotted—then the crashing growth sent back his stride. Antrim fired again with his glance gone slitted. There was a whistel of air like a quirt descending, a startled grunt, a burst of hoof sound that swiftly faded down the canyon trail.

Antrim's look was grim as he prodded the spent shells out of his pistol. The man had struck, had fled and vanished; but this was far from being the end of it. The man would be trying his luck again.

Reloading, he dropped the gun back into its holster, picked up the reins and led Jake's horse to a tree where he carefully tied him. The bushwhacker, leaving, had gone down the trail. It was in that direction that Jake Gauze's ranch lay.

With a match in cupped palm Antrim quartered for sign. The tracks, when he found them, were not easily read. The trail was hard and the would-be assassin had kept his horse carefully on it. The sign was well laced with the track of others, but a cool smile wreathed Antrim's lips as he straightened.

The man had come up the trail just as Antrim had. His horse was shod and its left hind shoe had not been properly set—either that, or the hoof had known more growth than its fellows. It left a mark to remember. A search disclosed where the man had mounted. There was one fair print at the side of the trail which the man's weight had left as he swung to the saddle. He wore, Antrim thought, a pretty dammed small boot.

Going back to the creek Antrim splashed across it, found the loamy shelf and climbed out on it. He came to the growth that fringed its bank and paused there, listening, eyes raking the shadows. There was nothing to hear save the occasional swish of the wind-waved branches.

Antrim shrugged morosely and

picked his way up the gummy bank, still on a hunt for that horse sound, still intrigued by the puzzle of how such sound could appear to come from an unbroken wall of sandstone.

The crudled gloom and the midnight silence picked up the sound of his travel loudly. When he came upon drier footing, small rocks left there by countless freshets, rolled and struck the water with miniature splashes that were swiftly lost in the night's black shadows.

It was a lonely spot, well shaped for murder. Antrim's look was watchful as he moved into the willow brush whose fluttering tops lay against the wall. The creek, he thought, did not sound quite right; did not sound quite so loud as it ought to have; not so loud as refraction from rock should have made it.

And then he was through the wind-trembled growth and night lay pitch black before him, a black unbleached by any paler shade, unleavened by a shape any blacker. His outstretched hands could not find any wall, could not touch anything above him.

It was then that he heard the whisper—the soft exhalation of an outpushed breath. . .

* * *

SUNDANCE stared at Jake keenly, an obsidian glint in his angled glance. "So you can show us the gold, eh?"

He appeared to mull something over in his mind for a moment; then he smiled very thinly and looked at Cope. "Did you hear that, Taiban? He can show us the gold."

"Yeah," Cope scowled. "What's holdin' him back? *I* ain't sittin' on his shirttail."

Sundance nodded at Jake. "Seein's believing; trot it out, if you've got it."

"In the mornin'—" Jake said; but Sundance's glance stopped him.

"There's a lot might happen between now an' morning."

The gambler, Cope, began sharpening his knife again. There was a glint in the man's slatted stare; and Jake's look, brushing the man's bandaged cheek, flinched away as though the knife's cold steel were at his throat already.

He lurched to his feet, both hands spread to the wall. "I—" Jake's supper turned over inside him. This was not the way he had planned this at all. He'd had no intention of showing that gold—no intention whatever of admitting he had it. He'd been bluffed, browbeaten into that foolish admission, no telling what the sight of that gold would do to these loot-hungry wolves he had brashly lured here.

"Well," Sundance said. "If you've got it let's see it."

Like a man in his sleep Jake Gauze turned round and lumbered to the fireplace. He bent and thrust an arm up the chimney. Then he came tramping back to the others again, dropped a sooty poke on the table, It made a dull, metallic sound as it hit, and Cope shot out a trembling hand; but Sundance said: "Just a minute, Cope," and coolly picked up the poke himself.

He broke the knots with his thick, strong fingers and spilled the sack's content out on the table where it lay, dully gleaming in the lamp's smoky light.

Greed was a shine in Cope's glinting eyes. Sundance poked the ingot with the end of a finger. "What else you got up that chimney, Jake?"

Jake stood like a man struck across the face.

Sundance smiled at him, thinly, slyly. "It was your idea; you said we'd pool our knowledge—like those Three Guardsmen. Remember? One for all, and all for one."

Sundance chuckled maliciously and Jake Gauze shivered. "Well," he said then. "What's it goin' to be, pardner? This gold's all right, but it ain't the main thing. You got something else that's heap more important. . .Ah—you wasn't by no chance thinking to cross us, was you?"

Cope turned and looked at him. Felt his knife again.

Jake's shoulders drooped like a quirted cur. A groan welled out of him; a sound of anguish. This Sundance knew how to torture a man. The wish rose in Jake to defy big

Sundance. But the wish was as far as his nerve would take him. Sundance's stare seemed to read Jake's thinking.

"What the hell, Jake," he said. "We're your friends; don't be foolish. Better to split than not to get any. If it comes to a showdown we can find it without you."

"So why the hell should we split with him?" Cope said. He tossed the knife back and forth in his hands and Jake, with a curse, went back to the chimney.

The other two bent to see what he'd brought them—a soiled scrap of paper, much wrinkled with handling. "It don't mean much," Jake told them sulkily, "without you know which one's Davis Mountain. It's just them instructions Zwing Hunt wrote out."

Peering over his shoulder they studied Hunt's scrawling. "You're right," Cope scowled. "We knew this much already." And Sundance nodded, glance reflective, considering. "Still and all—"

"Well," Jake glowered, "you was hellbent t' see it. It's your turn now. Let's see—"

"Why, I suppose you know, Jake," Sundance smiled. "We don't have anything; not a thing but the rumors which are common property."

He grinned at Jake blandly. "You kind of jumped to conclusions if you figured different. We been pokin' around—you were right about that part; but we hadn't a blasted thing to go on...just a chance word from Grounds it was near this canyon."

11

SO YOU'VE COME BACK, HEY YOU?

ANTRIM, crouched on the balls of his feet, tipped his six-shooter up and hung there, moveless, while a cricket sound rose two full octaves and nothing else disturbed the night. Abruptly, then, he laughed, aloud, its curtness flavored with an ironic derision that was geared to the restive stamp of a hoof as a horse, dead ahead, pawed the ground impatiently.

There was nobody here but that nickering bronc. He should have known as much, he told himself, for bushwhackers seldom ran in pairs and ony a fool would try again where one ambush had failed already. Excess caution would be the death of him yet.

Holstering his gun he shoved through the brush. The hidden horse softly whinnied again as a match burst to flame in the man's cupped palm.

Antrim saw the horse—there were two of them, really. A stud and a filly that was rising four. In height they were little over fourteen hands. But their look, the clean lines of them, more than offset any prejudice raised by this. Antrim loved horses and had no need to be told that here were a pair easily worth a king's ransom.

The stud was a chestnut, the filly a gray. Both had intelligent, contemplative eyes that scanned every move of the man before them. They were a picture, those two, that he had long remembered; he had never forgotten those slim, graceful bodies, those beautifully arched necks or that high tail carriage. It had been a long time, but he had not forgotten.

Thought of where he had seen them turned his gray eyes somber. Never, he decided, would their owner have sold them. There might, after all, be some fire in the smoke of Jake's tales of horse-runners plying their trade on this trail again.

Ibn Allah this chestnut stud was called. He was gaunt just now, looking rough and abused, his mane a snarl and there were burrs in the tail that once been the pride of all Torreon. Yet Antrim was in no doubt that this was Ibn Allah; nothing could ever disguise that action, the inherent beauty of iron-hard muscles, the bold, jutting head or the fierce, proud spirit that looked out of his eyes. He was a horse in a thousand—fit mount for a king; and, indeed, in his own unique way Don Lorenzo Enrico Por-

firo Fanegasy Lugo was by way of being right considerable of a king; he was Governor of Coahuila.

It was while he'd been checking the Matamoras end of Zwing Hunt's tale that Antrim first had seen these horses. Some kind of Mexican fiesta. There had been a great parade and Don Lorenzo had ridden at its head, upon the back of Ibn Allah who had been vastly praised by the multitude. At one point Don Lorenzo had been pleased to exhibit Ibn Allah's intelligence, and had stopped the parade for that purpose. With the rabble cheering lustily Ibn Allah had shaken hands with his master; he had shown comprehension of more than twenty words. Don Lorenzo, with no sign or signal, had abruptly fallen prone on the ground; immediately Ibn Allah had composed himself beside him. After a moment, as though wounded, the old Don had crawled across the animal's legs and draped himself across its back. "Arise!" he said in Spanish, and with extreme care Ibn Allah rose. There were many things Ibn Allah knew and he could run like a very antelope. There was a tale afoot in Torreon that no horse in all Coahuila could pass him at two miles.

ANTRIM'S match burnt out and he struck another seeking to find what means had been used to keep these horses safe here. They had been tied, each by a hind foot, to a stake driven deep in the ground with lengths of horsehair rope. This gave them freedom of moment to browse the grass growing rankly here, stopping them only short of the willow growth that marked their prison from the trail beyond. They got their water from a tiny ficsure which had been eroded through the loamy bank.

This hideout was a beauty; it seemed almost built for the purpose. A natural fault in the canyon wall. Not a cave, exactly, but a sort of cove, a forty foot dent in the sandstone wall...Cove! Antrim stopped in his thinking and looked about him while a kind of pucker narrowed down his eyes. There had been such a cove in Zwing Hunt's story. In the Davis Mountain Canyon, between Gun Spring and Silver Spring, where the canyon floor was overgrown with brush, the canyon wall curved inward, Hunt had said, to form a shallow cove. This *might* be the elusive 'Davis' canyon; this *might* be the cove Zwing Hunt had mentioned. If it were, then somewhere close there should be what time and the elements had left of that wagon—the burnt wagon four horses had brought out of Mexico piled high with the plunder of Monterrey and Matamoros.

If it were.

There should also be, within this pocket, the slender stone that was gouged with two crosses. Guy Antrim decided he would have to look.

He was moving forward when a new thought stopped him; it might be better to do his looking in daylight. No telling how far this matchlight traveled. It mightn't show ten feet beyond the brush; it might, however, show a great deal farther. And who could say who'd be using this trail? Yes, it would be a heap smarter to do his looking in daylight.

Grimly nodding, Antrim turned to retrace his steps; but Ibn Allah, nickering reproachfully, stopped the man in mid-stride, and he wheeled, tramping back through the murk to the stallion's side.

There had been many a stud in Antrim's experience that a man would do well to keep plumb away from; but he felt no fear of Ibn Allah. No horse, intelligent as this had proved, would have any mean or vicious impluse—at least, Antrim felt, Ibn Allah had not.

He approached without hesitancy, slid a hand up under its mane and spoke to the horse, stroked the arch of its neck, felt the smooth, rippling muscles beneath his fingers.

Ibn Allah whickered with joy—wagged his flaxen tail like a tickled puppy. He rubbed his head against Antrim's shoulder, buried his muzzle beneath the men's arm while Antrim talked to him. Now and again, as if to show his spirit, he would paw the ground and snort a bit, softly; and twice he reached down to sniff Antrim's boot toes as though he would

memorize the scent of this fellow, playfully twiggling the leather with his lips. Then he raised up suddenly and shook his head, exhaled a gusty breath and groaned through his teeth as though fed up with solitude—such a mournful sound it fetched a laugh from Antrim.

"Never mind," he said, slapping the stallion's chest, "you'll be quittin' this place before you're many hours older—that's a promise, horse. Straight from Guy Antrim.

"If we're lucky, this is," he added under his breath.

* * *

LAMPLIGHT raveled the squares of Jake's windows, split across the broad sills and yellowed the porch planks. Beyond the rocks the gun-gray drab of the eastern sky was brushed with the hint of a coming pink. Dawn was not far off—not much farther than a handful of minutes, yet the lamp still burned and Jake's gruff tones made a steady rumble through the yard's utter quiet.

There was a somber quality to this pre-dawn hush that turned Antrim's thoughts to the creekbank gunplay, to the man who had opened that treacherous attack. It seemed logical to suspect it was some one from this place. It could have been Sundance, but it was probably Kerrick. Recollection gave Antrim a picture of Kerrick slamming out of the house while he'd been held in talk by that woman from Tombstone. 'Lizette' she'd been billed in the old days. A dancer. But now she was calling herself 'Lolita'—Lolita Garcia. He wondered which was her real name.

Not that is mattered. Burying one's past behind a new monicker was quite the fashion—he had done it himself. He'd no wish to be known as Luther King, the ex-stage robber. Similar considerations had presumably prompted the girl's shift in names. It was all right with Antrim; but he could not help wondering what had brought her here. He wondered, too, what kind of reception she'd got from a man already overburdened with company. Not too fulsome a one, he guessed. It might be her, Jake was talking to now.

He remembered then how Kerrick, soft swearing, had gone stamping off to the pole corral; and he nodded, grimly. It was Kerrick, like as not, who had fired that shot. Was Kerrick the man who had stolen those horses? More like to be Jake, Antrim thought, lips curling. It hardly seemed likely Bat Kerrick would know of that slick little cove so well screened by those willows.

Yet it hadn't been Jake who had taken that shot at him. Jake's feet were too big to have left that sign—those small, dainty tracks Guy Antrim had found.

Jake's talk stopped suddenly. The house door opened and Jake's gaunt shape showed against the lamplight. "That you, Kerrick?" he demanded testily. "By Gawd—"

"No," Antrim said. "It's me—Guy Antrim."

There was a strained, ugly silence. Gauze said queerly: "Oh." Then, belligerently: "So you've come back, hev you? Come up here. I got some things t' say t' you."

"Presently," Antrim drawled, and rode on. He heard Jake curse; heard the door slammed shut again.

So Kerrick was still out. Kerrick hadn't come back yet. Maybe one of those shots Antrim fired had marked him. Or it might just be, Kerrick thought he'd been recognized and was cutting a shuck for some greener pasture lest return to this place bring retribution.

Antrim turned his horse toward the jaws of the stable.

Then he changed his mind. He might as well look at the hoofs of those horses. You never could tell. It *might* not have been Kerrick; it might be one of the others, Sundance or Cope, who had taken that chancey shot by the creekbank. Better see now if he could match that hoof track. If the horse was here he could forget about Kerrick. Kerrick might have gone off somewhere else entirely.

Kerrick had.

Approaching the corral Antrim's

horse shied violently, went back on its haunches snorting with fright. Keeping hold of the reins Antrim slipped from the saddle. It was not full light, but he saw the trouble at once. Just before him. In the hoof tracked dust a sprawled form lay, strangely crumpled and still—very dead.

Bat Kerrick.

12

BETTER STICK TO YOUR CARD GAMES

BLOOD was a dark, wet stain twixt his shoulders.

Antrim's widening look did not linger there but raced on to the horse that, quiet, nearby stood saddled, its reins carefully tied to a rail by the gatepost.

Antrim crossed to it quickly, bent and with soft words picked up its feet. It was not the horse with the ill-fitting shoe whose hoof had left the track by the creekbank. This horse had not been lately ridden; it had never gone out of this yard at all. It had gone no farther than it stood right now. There lay its tracks, plain as paint in the dust.

There were other tracks, too. Antrim's upwheeling glance, cocked to follow them, went suddenly narrow and extremely still. The planes of his cheeks, in this brightening light, showed an instant discipline as Sundance drawled, "Some takes a mite longer than others..."

He let his words trail off. A lazy smile curled his lips with patronage. "It's all right with me. What happens to these guys ain't no skin off *my* nose."

"If you're tryin'," Antrim said, "to connect this stiff—" but Sundance's shrug disclaimed any effort.

"I never dig my spurs in the other man's business; kill the whole push if you want to, bucko."

With a smug, hateful smile Sundance turned and tramped off. Antrim watched him cross the yard toward the house; heard the grumbling drone of Jake's talk quit. Heard the bang of a door. Then Idy Red's voice, high and angry, said: "Either she gits out or I do—one!"

The porch boards skreaked under Sundance's boots.

With a curse Antrim turned and bent down over Kerrick. It took all his strength to budge the knife that was buried to the hilt in Kerrick's back. But he got it finally and, straightening grimly, bleak of eye, tight lipped, he made for the house.

He hit the porch just in time to hear Sundance say, "He's down by the gate. Your new ramrod's with him."

Antrim crossed the planks in one bold stride, yanked open the door and stopped by the table. "You forgot your knife," he said to Sundance; and buried the blade's bloody point in the table.

Jake choked on an oath. The girl from Tombstone swayed. But Sundance, coolly smiling, said: "It ain't *my* knife."

"It's—"

"Nope. I can't claim the corpse for you, either, bucko."

Twin dimples dented the man's round cheeks; he grinned at Antrim, enjoying this hugely. He remarked as though expounding some profound truth, "This is geared to patterns. One thing leads to another. A natural law, just like night following day. When a man hires a gun packer there's bound to be blood spilled."

"If you think that—" Antrim began; but Jake's bugged eyes never left the knife.

The Tombstone girl's dark look stayed expressionless.

Idy Red's glance, from the blade to Antrim, told in its horror of some cherished conviction all too adequately demonstrated. "That—that Bowie..." Jake said.

THE LINES of his face looked more old, more haggard. The glint of his stare held the glaze of a fever. He half raised a hand but it

shook and he dropped it. "That's Cope's knife!" he blurted.

"Sure it's Cope's," Sundance jeered. "Don't tell us you figured he'd be usin' his own!"

"If you'd habla in English—"

The burly Sundance chuckled. "I guess you know what Jake hired you for."

"If you're tryin' to say I killed Bat Kerrick—"

"I didn't see nobody else propin' up the scenery."

"*You* was there!"

"I sure was, bucko."

"Gawd's sake, you two—quit the wranglin'. will you?" Jake mopped his face with the back of a shirt-sleeve. "If he's dead, he's dead. Argyin' about it ain't goin' t' he'p him. Poke never killed him; Poke jest rode in—"

"Yeah. From where?" grinned Sundance. "From round the back of the barn, for all *you* know. If this guy didn't kill him what are you paying him for?"

Antrim said through locked teeth: "If you reckon I killed him why not do something—"

"No skin off *my* nose," Sundance smiled. "I told you that, didn't I?"

"Then—"

"I just want to get it straight for the record; I don't want you going around telling *I* killed him."

Sundance turned away like he was done with Antrim. He bowed toward the girls. said apologetically, "I'm sorry you ladies had to be hearing this business. I'll not be keeping you longer; I'll be saying goodnight to you." He bowed again; turned and left the room. The sound of his spurs jingled off toward the stable.

"Where's Cope?" Antrim said, finally breaking the silence.

Jake shrugged, shoved himself from the chair and crossed to a cupboard, coming back with a bottle. He broke its neck on the edge of the table, sloshed some whisky in a glass and downed it; grimaced. He filled the glass again, then his glance crossed Antrim's. "You—you reckon he done it?"

"I don't know," Antrim said. "First thing I knew my horse was back on his haunches, snortin'. I could see a man's shape in the dust by the gate. I got down an' went over. This Sundance opened his mouth about that time; he was behind Kerrick's bronc in the shadow of them peppers. The bronc's reins was tied to a rail by the gatepost."

Antrim considered. "It don't look like Kerrick—"

He'd been gone half the night—since right after you quit us. Prob'ly jest got back."

"He never left the yard," Antrim said. "I took a look at his tracks. That bronc he saddled never went no farther than where he was tied at. Question is, who tied him? If it was Sundance..."

A sweat came out on Jake's cheeks again. He shirtsleeved it off. Then he said, s h o r t and gruff-like, "Chances are, it was. If he was by them pepper trees when you saw him—"

"You got no proof he was anyplace round theah!" Idy Red, eyes indignant, broke in on them angrily. "All you got is this devil's word fo' it! The word," she flared scornfully, "of a cheap border gun packer! Anyone c'ld see he's tryin' t' lay it on Sundance. He's layin' it on him because he's scared—"

Antrim said, tight and short: "I ain't laid nothing on him—yet."

"Well, it ain't f'om lack of tryin', I swear! Of all the killin', lyin' sidewinders—"

"You shet up," Jake snarled, "an' git t' your bed! I've took all yo' lip I'm a mind to fer *one* night! G'wan—*git!*"

"An' you, Poke," he said, flinging it over his shoulder, "go take you a look at them tracks ag'in. I'll tend t' these hellcats. Come back in a while an' we'll thresh this over— I got a notion or two thet might work out fer you. Anyway, come back."

* * *

THERE WAS a wind blowing up the canyon and the sun's red tide was just washing the rim when Antrim breasted the dust of the yard. There was anger in him and a kind

of grudging respect for the way that fool girl had stuck up for Sundance. That man was a cool, slick customer; of a kind to fool wiser heads than hers. That she liked him was obvious. She had liked big Sundance the first time she saw him; had been impressed by his manners and the cool, easy grace of him.

For that, Guy Antrim did not blame her. Big, magnetic, vital, Sundance was indeed a fine figure of a man and had probably fooled a right smart of folks with his swaggering ways and his gold-toothed smile. His eyes, when he chose, could look deceptively merry, and the dimples that dented those round, dark cheeks made connivery and Sundance appear total strangers.

But Antrim could see to the black, rotten core of him—he was like a coral snake, Antrim thought—mighty pretty to look at and mighty deadly.

"Go take you another look at them tracks," Jake had said; and Antrim, shouldering his way through the wind, resolved to. He wanted a look at the horses' hoofs anyway, having still in mind that track by the trailside.

Then a thought came to mind that creased his cheeks in a scowl. He should have taken a look at Sundance's tracks—not because Sundance might have taken that shot at him back by the creekbank, but because Sundance's tracks, in the dust of this yard, might plainly have solved the sudden death of Bat Kerrick.

With all this wind it was probably too late now; but he would have a look, anyhow.

The sun stood free of the canyon rim when he paused by the place he had found Bat Kerrick. The man's body had been removed; nor was the saddled horse longer tied to the gate's rail. These matters had been nicely taken care of—by Sundance, probably, with his long foresightedness. And the tracks of the gate-hitched horse, and his own, had been well intermingled with careful efficiency. The wind had erased all boot tracks completely.

Antrim crossed to the peppers and, lounging against one, eyed the broncs in the pole corral. The one he had ridden was there amongst them, unsaddled, unbridled, gnawing bark from the snubbing post. They were a good bunch of horses, as range horses go; and there was one, of the kind called 'claybank', of a solid cream color, that was considerably better than the run of its kind. This was a compact horse, short of back, close coupled, deep middled and heavily muscled. He had a heavy jaw, quiet eye and small ear. He had a fairly short neck and his chest was wide. He would stand, Antrim gauged, about 15.2 and would weigh pretty close to eleven hundred pounds.

"A lot of horse," Antrim murmured, straightening.

"Sure is," a voice said, "if you mean that claybank. Worth right considerable of any man's money."

Antrim casually turning saw Taiban Cope.

HOW THE man had gotten there was not the point; that he'd managed to do so was a definite warning. It was time Guy Antrim called a stop to his musing. This was no kind of crew to get absent-minded with—not unless you were hunting a harp or a halo.

"Yours?" Antrim said, lifting up his eyebrows.

Cope shook his head. "I can't afford such fancy stuff."

"Jake's?" asked Antrim.

Cope permitted a pale smile to brush his lip corners. "Nope. That claybank was Kerrick's—his private horse."

"Kerrick's!" Antrim said. "That ain't the horse he had tied to the gatepost."

"I wouldn't know about that," said the gambler, and got a cigar from a stuffed vest pocket. He bit off an end and held a match to the weed. "It's Kerrick's—you've my word for it, Antrim. I recall very clearly the occasion he acquired it. It was over near Lockhart a couple of years ago; the cards really talked for Bat that night...."

Cope paused reflectively. Took the cigar from his mouth and eyed it, turning it over in his long, slim fingers. "What will you take for that map—cash talking?"

"What map?" Antrim said. His eyes met the eyes of the gambler straightly.

"Zwing Hunt's map to the Curly Bill plunder." The gambler's eyes, bright and hard, met Antrim's and a crease of amusement quirked his mouth. "Let's spread our cards on the table, shall we? I'm pretty well certain you've got the map. I would like to have it. What will you take for it?"

"I'm not sure," Antrim said, "I'd care to get rid of it. In any event you'd find the price pretty steep."

"I'd expect to," Cope said. "But the word 'steep' is relative—a matter of opinion. Make it steep as you want. Let's hear it."

He could not quite hide the eagerness in him. It showed in the rush of those two last words, in the glint of his eye, in his quickened breathing. "Name it, man—name it."

"You'll not get that map," Antrim said, "till you drop me." He reached out and caught Taiban Cope by his shirtfront, lifting the pale, gangling man to his boot toes. "Not," he repeated, "till you drop me—*savvy?*"

He stared deep into the man's squirming soul, dropped him suddenly, stepping back disgusted. "You're a small-bore gun for such a large notion. Better stick to your card games, Cope, and forget it."

13

PLENTY TO THINK ABOUT

WHEN THE man had gone Antrim scowled a little. He wheeled, abruptly, and went into the stable. It had been less than wise to use the gambler that way. Like most little men Cope would long remember it—would cherish it, even, till, poisoning his every secret thought, it would drive the man, berserk, to vengeful action.

Antrim frowned, swore softly. But there were things about Cope which he found more urgent, more puzzling, problematical, than predicting the course of the man's future actions. Certain aspects of his talk invited looking into. In particular, his remarks about that claybank gelding. Kerrick's, Cope had named it. But if the horse were Kerrick's why had Kerrick readied another? Why, also, afterwards, had Kerrick tied that other—or hadn't he? What obscure pattern of thought of impulse had been animating Kerrick when death had come out of the dark and stabbed him?

What had put in Cope's head the notion that Antrim was possessor of the map? How had Taiban Cope come to call him 'Antrim'? Jake's introduction had named him 'Poker Face'. Had Gauze later seen fit to amend this—or had Cope learned from the girl?—from that hussy from Tombstone?—that Lolita-nee-Lizette; or was it Lizette-nee-Lolita?

If *she* had told them his name was Antrim, might she not also have disclosed the facts of his background and have told them as well that he was Luther King—the man once jailed for the Benson stage job?

This thing had more angles than a pile of split kindling.

Antrim leaned against a stall-side, thinking. Did Cope *know* he had Hunt's map, or was Cope merely guessing? Was it generally supposed, or.... What had Bat Kerrick been doing with all those hours between leaving the house and being found by Antrim? How much of that time had Bat been lying there dead?

Might be a good idea, Antrim thought, if he lost no more time in examining the cavvy for the drygulcher's horse with that bad hind shoe. It was entirely possible the man had no connection with Jake's outfit; either way, continued health demanded that he find out pronto.

His shape was bent to slide between the bars when Jake's gruff call from the porch brought him upright. For

a moment he hung there, mightily tempted to let Jake stew and go on with this business. But common sense prevailed. It would do him no good to be found with the horses; better get on up there. Jake was not of the type that waits with patience.

He was starting houseward when his boot jogged a rock. The rock jogged his mind and he stopped, eyes narrowing. That map! He had better get rid of it. Packing it round was like packing thawed dynamite. It was worse, now that these rannies suspected him of having it.

His glance, raking round, brought up at the stable. The building was founded on an erection of creek rock, laid without binder, rock atop rock. Be quick and simple to stuff Hunt's map in between a pair of them—and who would think to look for it there?

He took off his hat to get the paper, thankful the stable screened him from Jake. He pulled down the band, shook the hat. He stared blankly. And then, very softly, he swore.

* * *

"WOMEN," Jake said, "is hell. Take 'em any way you've a mind to. There ain't nothin', hardly, a man kin do that'll bring 'im more grief than a unwed woman. Why, I've seen the..."

His voice trailed off. He snorted; grinned a little. "I don't guess you come here t' her about women. Haul up thet chair, Poke, an' rest your fanny. Here—hev a smoke? Well, I don't blame you; ain't much kin beat a han'-rolled Durham. Y' ain't never felt quite right in yer mind, hev you?—I mean about me—about this layout I got here. You bin figurin', likely, I never got you out here t' stand off rustlers.

"I didn't, neither."

There was a calculant glint in the glance he gave Antrim, a beady alertness that was urgent and probing, that was watchful, inquiring, that was moved by a need not readily determinable.

"There's rustlers, all right. Horsethiefs, mostly. Every two-three weeks they come up this trail. But that ain't what I got you out here for."

He smoothed the leather of his scuffed black chaps. "I got you out here 'cause I knew damn well I was goin' t' need he'p....Well—whyn't you say somethin'?—ast a few questions?"

Antrim drew up his knees and eyed Jake across them. "I reckon you'll tell me what you want me to know."

Jake, staring, snorted. "You're a cool one, all right. You're colder'n a well chain—an' that's the kind I need. You ain't no everyday fly-by-night gunhawk; you got a head on your shoulders. I need that, too. I'm goin' t' tell you somethin'. I was takin' a chance when I hired you, Antrim. I wasn't noways sure you was the kind t' fit in here.

"I ain't sure now. But I got t' hev backin'. I got t' hev it quick, or them gawddamn wolves is goin' t' lift my scalp. So here's what I'll do, boy. I'll make you a sportin' proposition; I'll lay my cards right out on the table so you'll know where you're at every step of the way. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

"I can tell a heap better after I've seen your cards."

"You'll see 'em all right, Jake Gauze, by Gawd, don't doublecross no one. When I deal a fella in I deal 'im *all the way* in."

"Get at it then. What you waitin' on?"

Jake Gauze threw a look at the doors, at the window. He tipped his gaunt shoulders forward then. "I'm goin' t' tell you something I wouldn't tell another livin' man. By Gawd, I—"

"Choke off the blat an' get at it then."

Jake's bulbous nose abruptly twitched like a rabbit's. His cheeks creased a scowl; but when he spoke he said reasonably enough, "It's important you savvy I know what I'm talkin' about—an' by Gawd, I ort to! I rode with Curly Bill in the ol' days; next t' Ringo an' Hughes I was the one Bill most counted on. Don't ast me why—I never could figure it; but it's so. I knowed a hell's brew of secrets none of them other boys ever did cotton to."

"You'll be knowin', I guess, where the Curly Bill plunder's hid."

"By Gawd I ort to. But I don't! Curly Bill hisself never knowed where they hid the stuff. 'Course he knowed where some of it was; so did I. But thet fox-sly hound, Zwing Hunt, an' his pardner, dug it up one night an' hauled it off t' thet damn mountain. Every last peso! Every 'dobe dollar!

"'Fore we c'ld grab 'em an' git the truth outen 'em, Grounds was killed an' thet smart Zwing Hunt had lammed off t' Texas. Bill sent me an' Jim Hughes after him, but he was dead an' planted time we'd got him tracked down t' his uncle's place. He'd bin in thet fight at the Stockton ranch an' the wound he got there finally done fer 'im. Curly an' the boys was plumb fit t' be tied when they found out how he'd put it over on 'em. But there you are—that's the truth as Gawd hears me."

AGAINST his wish Antrim was inclined to believe Jake. The ring of truth was in Jake's testy words and the twist of his lips showed the bitterness of them.

"Well," Antrim, "where do I come in?"

"That's what I'm comin' at," Jake rumbled gruffly. "You claimed las' night you wanted in on it; you showed you knowed right smart about it. So—" Jake's bright little eyes met Antrim's fairly. "Here's what I'll do, boy. I now this country inside out. I know, by Gawd, where thet mountain is. You th'ow in your map of the counts an' paces an' I'll pool my savvy of the country with you: jest you an' me—see? Anythin' we git we'll split fifty-fifty."

Antrim eyed him intently. "Who said anything about me havin' a map?"

"Not a damn soul. Not a shrinkin' soul, boy—but you got one awright; you got Hunt's map. An' with what I got it's a cinch—be jest like rollin' off a goddam log. Y' ain't doubtin' it, are you?"

"What about these hardcases? Where are they comin' in?"

"They ain't," Jake said, and his look was baleful. "I've had about all I kin take off them guys."

He shaped up a smoke from his sack of Durham. Licked the paper, pushed the pouch toward Antrim. "What do you say, boy? We goin' t' show these sons where t' git off at?"

"You're expectin' me to take a heap on faith, ain't you?"

"How's that?"

"I ain't seen nothin' yet that proves you know anything with regard to that mountain."

Jake's bright little eyes grinned back at him. "I ain't seen nothin' yet that proves you got Hunt's map. But thet's all right; I ain't askin' to. I ain't givin' you the dope on thet mountain, neither—not till I'm sure goin' t' play square with me. Way I look at it, that's all thet's standin' twixt me an' the graveyard. But if you'll stick with me, by Gawd we'll clean up here."

Antrim pushed back his chair and stared at Jake. He let speculation color his glance. All he had worked for these last long years was here before him, was looked in the conscienceless mind of this fellow—of this scheming Jake who would cross a man up with no more qualms than a centipede. This was the contact toward which he'd been working so persistently and continually ever since the night he had talked with Hunt's uncle.

YET NOW that he faced him on the man's own terms Antrim felt no triumph, no sense of satisfaction. He felt a strong unease, an edgy need of caution. He knew he would make this deal with Jake, but he did not trust the man. Jake would do what he had to, toward keeping the bargain; he would do that much and not a hair's weight more. Jake had claimed his knowledge of the mountain's location was all that stood between himself and death; Hunt's map was all that stood between Guy Antrim and death. What would happen if they learned he no longer had it, was not, Antrim thought, any subject for guesswork.

He felt sure enough now who had

stolen it from him. While he lay asleep in the brush that first day, fast thinking Sundance must have thoroughly searched him.

But two could play at that kind of a game. And two could play at brother Jakes's game, likewise. "Also," Jake said, "I've got Hunt's written instructions. How-somever I ain't countin' 'em as a basis fer partnership; these other squirts have seen 'em so I'll th'ow 'em in gratis. They got t' crowdin' me las' night—"

"If you've got the instructions," Antrim mentioned coolly, "you won't hardly be needin' the map, nor me."

Jake said, "I thought about that. Look—I'll tell you the truth, boy. Them instructions ain't worth a damn without you've got the map. 'Cause why? Because thet stinker, Hunt, never put nothin' in 'em t' give you direction. They say 'From such-an'-such go three steps to so-an'-so' —such tripe as that! No north or south nor anythin' else to 'em. Nope —I'm needin' you, boy. Is it a deal or ain't it?"

Jake Gauze peered up into his face.

Antrim wondered how much of Jake's talk was dependable. Precious little, probably; a man would have to watch Jake all of the way. Strangely enough then, Guy Antrim smiled. The smile toughened his look and leaked the mildness out of him.

"What about that cove?" he said.

"Cove?"

Jake looked blank.

"You hear all right."

"I dunno what you're talkin' about. Cove! *What* cove?"

"You wouldn't be knowin' about that cove up the canyon? Or about them horses? You expect me to believe that? Right on your doorstep, an' you not know it? If that's the kind of a pardner you are—"

"Hold on," Jake growled. "When I pardner a man by Gawd I'll skate acrost hell's ice with the son if he can show me any reason I ort to. But when you talk about coves an' horses—"

"Okay," Antrim said. "Mebbe I been havin' a pipe dream; mebbe I imagined that cove—an' that shot you threw at me—"

"Shot!"

Jake mopped at his cheeks with the back of a sleeve, but the move didn't hide the strange look of his eyes. He said again, "I—I don't know what you're talkin' about."

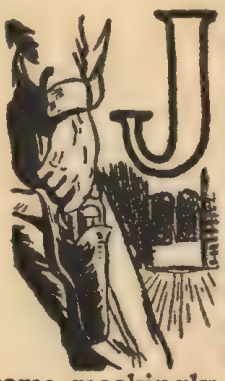
"What are you acared of then?" Antrim said.

Jake backed out of his chair like a spider. Stood with crouched shoulders against the wall. "I ain't," he snarled, "scared of nothin'. damn you!"

But the words were a lie. Their tone convicted him. The shake of his hand showed him badly rattled. Antrim looked at Jake's boots. Too large for the track he had seen by the trailside. Back of Antrim the door opened.

14

—JUST REMEMBER THAT, BUCKO!



JAKE'S eyes looked trapped.

"There's somebody coming," Antrim said.

Jake's lips writhed back from his yellow teeth. But he did not speak, nor did Antrim speak; the sound of Sundance's laugh came mockingly. "Don't stand there, Jake, like a bronc with the colic. Go make your friend welcome. What do *I* care who you ask out here? Ask the whole damn country if you think it will help you."

He crossed to the table, coolly rested a hip there. He swung his leg and regarded Antrim. "Jake managed to talk you into this yet?"

"And why," Antrim said, "should that interest you?"

"Anything interests me that touches that treasure."

"That why you killed Kerrick?"

Sundance took his hip off the table. His lips quit smiling. A gusty breath fell out of him and a pale glint cut through the depths of his stare. "I don't take that talk off no

one," he said.

Silence crowded the walls of the room. Then Antrim said: "The road's still open."

"You better get up on a horse then and use it."

He folded his gloves with a meticulous care. He looked at Antrim with his eyes half shut and laid the gloves on the edge of the table. The silence grew, and, Jake's eyes were enormous.

A mockingbird lifted its voice outside and the noontime sun through a tree's still foliage laced a network of shadow across the big man's legs. Antrim looked at his boots.

Sundance's ruddy skin was a parchment tight-spread across the jut of his cheekbones. He said in a tone too calm to be real: "You goin' or ain't you?"

"Ain't," Antrim said; and Sundance leaped.

* * *

THE MAN coming up the canyon reined his black horse around a huge red boulder and beheld Jake's ranch at the forks of the way where a trail turned west toward the smoky haze of the San Simon Valley. He pulled up the black and sat rolling a smoke while his eyes took in the bright view of Jake's buildings.

He was an average-sized man in a stovepipe hat who had once dealt a bank in a Tombstone chance parlor. He had, below his pale hazel eyes, a generously proportioned, slightly updished nose. A heavy mustache hid his mouth from view and a square, cleft chin imparted to him an air of strong resolution quite out of harmony with the facts of his past.

He preferred to be known as a gentleman gambler, but those who knew him declared Pete Spence jumped claims a heap better than he handled the cards. When his luck had been out, in the old days, Pete had not been above restocking his larder by donning a mask and exhibiting his six shooter.

The payrolls for the Bisbee mines had used to come in on the Benson stage, to be later transferred to the Bisbee conveyance, which was hauled by four horses instead of six and was therefore slower on the uphill grades. Pete and the drivers of the Bisbee stage had grown well acquainted during his operations; but the law had eventually put an end to these. Pete knew all about the heat at Yuma. It was after the Governor had pardoned him that Pete took a hand in the miners' problems.

Still regarding Jake's yonder ranch house, Pete took off his hat and dabbed at his forehead with a dainty wisp of blue laced cambric. After which he sighed, ran a hand round his collar and adjusted the set of his black bow tie. His mining income had about played out and he thought he would look up his old friend Cope, who had left word in town he could be found at Jake's ranch.

But, now that he sat with Jacke's place in the crotch of his gazing, Pete began to have qualms concerning his brashness in coming here. There were quite a few rumors romping round about Jake; they were mostly unpleasant, like the feel of this canyon with its heritage of violence. It wasn't only Mexicans who had fed their blood to these thirsty sands; many a man who'd come into this place had left his bones for the buzzards and coyotes.

He seemed to hear in the sunny stillness the soft, plodding hoofs of an oncoming mule train. But that was sheer fancy. No mule trains used this canyon now; nothing used it but Jake Gauze and his cattle.

PETE SPENCE got his blue cambric again, the unease that was in him grown stronger than ever. He thrust a hand inside his black coat, a prey to sudden chills though the day was stifling. He brought out his sixgun and stared at it thoughtfully. He broke it open and examined its loads, assuring himself it was entirely in readiness to protect his life should the need arise. A flick of his wrist clacked the weapon shut. He gave it a couple of turns by the trigger guard, restoring it carefully to its spring case again.

After which he felt better.

He cocked his hat at a jaunty angle,

picked up his reins and lit his cigar. Urging his horse through the heated sand he bolstered his courage with a bawdy song whose heroine was left in a sad predicament when he suddenly stopped, craned forward, listening.

There was a fight going on inside Jake's house; he'd heard enough of such sounds to know. There wasn't no talk—no shouts, no curses; but the meaty impact of flesh on flesh, the stamp of feet, the grunts, the panting—these were sounds he knew every shade of.

Being a cautious man in his sober moments, Spence considered departing at once, but curiosity got the best of him. He swung from the black and catfooted closer.

It was a fight, all right.

The door was open. The floor boards groaned as Spence crossed the porch. He saw Jake Gauze backed against a wall. The ranchman's eyes were bugged like saucers. Then he saw the fighters; they were both big men, both tough, both range bred with strong, hard faces. The one with two guns was a handsome man with curly black hair. He was dressed very flashy. He was confident looking, very sure of himself; quite certain the other man was just where he wanted him.

The other man was crouched in a corner. He had his chin on his chest and his legs locked wabbly. He was a younger man, more rangy, less heavy; a yellow haired man with a highboned face that had taken much punishment. By the look of his eyes he could not last much longer.

Pete's glance sawed back to the burly one again. Every detail of build was in this man's favor. He was bigger all over than the yellow haired man. He had a solidity, a massiveness, a weight too rugged to feel the hurt of blows. There was something, Pete thought, vaguely familiar about him.

Then he saw the man's muscles bunch—saw his shape hurtling forward.

The yellow haired man went down on his knees. He was that way when the burly man struck him; and then he was up on his feet again, whirling, as the big man's shape crashed into the wall.

The big man picked himself off the floor. He shook his head as though to still the ringing of it. The smaller man smashed him full in the mouth. It was a terrific blow and he followed it up with two more to the jaw, then a jab to the ear.

The big man's head rolled. His eyes held the glaze of an axe-struck steer's. A groping hand found the wall and clung to it.

The yellow haired man was all set to finish him when a girl flung out of a yonder room and jammed the muzzle of a gun in his back. Jake Gauze jumped clear of the wall and grabbed her. He wrested the pistol out of her grasp and sent her, cursing, against the fireplace where she crouched, cheeks white, breathing hard, eyes flashing.

"You keep outa this, damn you!" Jake rasped at her balefully.

The yellow haired man said, "You got enough, Sundance?"

"Never mind—never mind!" the big man growled at him. He weaved away from the wall, pulled his shoulders together. He shook his head, still stupid from punishment. "My time will come—just remember that, bucko. I take care of my debts and I don't forget them."

He lurched past Spence without seeing him, went across the porch and out into the yard.

15

CROSS CURRENTS

ANTRIM, turned to look after him, saw the Tombstone man where he stood by the doorway. The look of those eyes rocked Spence to his boot heels. Gauze saw him then. He said without bothering to trim his emotions: ders. "That's all," he said, and went tramping off.

"What the hell are *you* doin' here?"

"I...ah...come out to see Cope—"

"This ain't no gamblin' dive—nor it ain't no damn health resort, neither. Climb back on your hoss, Spence, an' get t' hell outen here."

Pete Spence looked away from Jake's scowling face.

Antrim said, "Maybe this guy is the one that killed Kerrick," and a barbed kind of humor rolled through Jake's stare. "How about it?"

Spence's cheeks went sallow. He seemed to have been caught with a lump in his throat. The lump, by his look, was about to strangle him. All the lines of his face ran together. He looked, Antrim thought, like a fish out of water.

"I guess," Jake said, "we better send fer John Slaughter."

He lowered an eyelid in Antrim's direction. "Saddle a hoss, Poke, an' fetch him out, will you?"

"Right away," Antrim said.

The man clutched at his shoulder. "Honest to Gawd—I don't know nothin' about it—I never heard of no Kerrick! I ain't never killed nobody!"

"Thruth is man's best defense," Antrim said. "If you're tellin' the truth you go no need to worry; the law don't never hamstring the innocent."

Spence saw the dark glitter of his eyes and shivered. "Gawd Almighty, Jake! I thought we was friends! You goin' to stan' by an' never lift your hand?"

"D'you think I want my neck in a noose?"

"B-But—"

"Git on with it, Poker Face," Jake said blackly. "There's a law in this land an' a man's got t' heed it. The Law says anyone that hides a murderer—"

"I never murdered him!" Pete Spence yelled. "I dunno this Kerrick from a barrel of apples—I ain't even seen him!"

"We'll take care of that. Tell you what I'll do," Jake said, all of a sudden. "'F you want t' save us some trouble an, sign a confe—"

"You'll let me go? You'll let me ride outa here?"

"Well," Jake said, "I'll consider it, anyway..."

ANTRIM, heading for the stable, had plenty to think about. Things were happening fast—too fast by far. He knew in his bones he should have killed big Sundance. It was not in the fellow's character to forget the hurt of that beating he'd taken. He would bide his time—probably strike without warning after the way of his kind. The look of a snake had been in Sundance's glare—and that girl! That Idy Red!

He could still feel the jab of that gun in his back. He told himself with a wry kind of grin, "When she likes a man she goes whole hog for him." It was too damned bad she'd hung her liking on Sundance.

What lay behind Jake's fear of the fellow? Jake seemed to wilt every time big Sundance came round. He appeared to work on Jake like a bad case of sunstroke. It was odd, Antrim thought, because Jake showed tough enough when it came to the others. He'd stood up to Bat Kerrick: had been salty enough in his handling of Spence.

Might be worth his while to find out what lay back of it. Either Sundance had some hold on him, or Jake...

It was right there in his thinking that Jake's growl called him. Jake came lumbering up. "Saddle two broncs. You got to go to town."

"I thought you was runnin'—"

"I ain't talkin' about Spence; I kin handle that fool. It's that damn Lolita. Idy Red won't stay under the same roof with 'er. I got to git her outen here..." Jake said irritably: "Damn a man that'll fool round with a woman! I wish t'hell I'd never of laid eyes on 'er!"

"You let Idy Red run your business for you?"

"I don't let *nobody* run my business. But there's a limit to what that girl..."

"Well, go on," Antrim said; but Jake was all done with talking.

He stood there and looked at Antrim with his eyes gone a little narrow, with his high, flat face unreadable.

Then he wheeled his bony shoul-

ders. "That's all," he said, and went tramping off.

ANTRIM got down his rope and went into the corral. The horses were quick to sense work ahead. They moved into a weaving huddle, each trying to put himself back of another, getting as far as they could from him, crowding the poles at the corral's far side. Antrim suddenly remembered he was looking for something.

He had just discovered it when Sundance said: "Goin' for a ride on the dead man's pony?"

Antrim let down the hoof and straightened. Sundance returned his cold stare amusedly. The bruises he'd gathered were still in evidence, but aside from these he seemed quite his old self. He even chuckled when Antrim ignored him.

Antrim tramped through the dust and got his saddle. He heaved it onto the big bronc's back. It was a three-quarters rig, and the sudden yank he gave to the trunk strap puckered the claybank's hide where the fishcord's constriction squeezed the cinch ring.

He stared across his shoulder at Sundance. "For a big guy, mister, you move mighty quiet."

He slipped on the bridle and took his rope off; caught the girl's horse, neat, by a forefoot. "I s'posed you'd be hittin' the high spots by this time."

Sundance grinned. "No bunch-quitter blood in *my* background, bucko."

Antrim saddled Lolita's horse without reply to him. Slipped on its hackamore and led the pair outside the corral.

"Hmm," Sundance drawled, and ironically misquoted, "A jug of wine, jerked beef, and thou beside me—"

One stride brought Antrim hard against him. "If it's another installment you're honin' for..."

The big man's dark, bruised cheeks roaned wickedly. "Never put your hand on me again, King. Never get in my way again—"

"Or what?"

"I'll leave it like that. 'Or what'," Sundance said; and was abruptly smiling, very cool and assured, very broadly tolerant. "What the hell," he said with a grin. "We're pawin' dirt like a couple of bulls. Let's call it off and get down to business."

"Business?"

The burly Sundance nodded. "Yeah," he said; raked a quick look round, bent toward Antrim with convincing earnestness. He said quietly, "We can use you, King. Even knowing your record we can damn well make a place for you—"

"That's the second time you've called me 'King'. It happens my name is 'Antrim'. I guess you've got it figured I'm an outlaw or something. Some cut-an'-run breed of skunk, like yourself."

Sundance said, showing no offence, "Just wasting breath, King. I know you all right. There's just a chance I can clear the slate for you—wipe 'er off clean an' let you start from scratch. I'll expect whatever help you can give me—"

"Got the same itch that's botherin' Jake an' Cope, have you?"

"How's that?"

"They think," Antrim said, "I've got Hunt's map. You wouldn't of sold 'em that notion, would you? Figurin', mebbe, they'd slit my throat for it?"

Sundance showed him a thoughtful smile; tipped his head in a reluctant fashion. "Afraid I did, I was fixing to get them other gents squabblin'—never thought about you...

"But never mind that. Here—wait! Don't go off half cocked. That's been your trouble, King—always jumping at conclusions—crowding the fence. Like you forcin' that fight on me. I ow you one for that. It may be the means of fixing things for us; it was damn good medicine."

Antrim stared at him.

SUNDANCE chuckled, his twinkling eyes boyish. "You spun better than you knew when you started that fight. Give me just the chance I been huntin' for. But you'll be wantin' to know about that Benson stage job the Earps run you in for. You'll remember there was three guys stepped out an' stuck up that stage; there was a lot of talk around town about them. Lot of folks figured those

three was Bill Leonard, Jim Crane an' Harry Head. Expect you been figuring that way, too. As a matter of fact, two of them *was* Jim Crane an' Bill Leonard. But Harry Head wasn't near the place. The third gent in the deal was Holliday—yeah, the admirable 'Doc'. The T.B. dentist with the sawed-off shotgun.

"That same afternoon Doc hired him a horse from a Tombstone livery. He told the stableman he might be gone a week or ten days, or that he might, just possibly, return that same night. He left town about 4 o'clock with a Henry rifle tucked under his arm. He was headed towards Charleston. About a mile out of town he veered towards Contention. He was seen again sometime between 10 and 1 o'clock that night riding back into town with his horse all lather.

"He got off at the stable; had another horse rigged for him. He left this fresh nag hitched at a tie pole for the rest of the night, trying to make it look like he'd never left town. Johnny Behan's bunch held a private session and poured it into him. Doc just gave 'em the horse laugh. Told them to prove it; told them if it *had* been him that eighty thousand wouldn't have gotten away. Behan told him it was known he had made damaging statements. Doc had a real good belly laugh that time. 'So I'm a stage robber, eh? Just like me to go an' talk a rope around my neck. I stick up the stage, kill a couple guys, an' blab it around all over the country. I guess there won't none of the road-agents trust me no more; I'll just have to be a damn outcast, I reckon.'

"That's what he told them," Sundance said. "Nothing ever come of it; no one tried to arrest him. But he was in it all right. I've uncovered some evidence that ain't been brought out. String along with me and I'll see what I can do for you."

Antrim looked at him.

Sundance grinned. "Go ahead—go on and call me a liar. But if you want a fresh start you better be helping me."

"A story like that..." Antrim said, and paused.

Sundance nodded. "You're right, of course. It needs proof. But here—" he drawled, and brought up a hand. "I guess even you will admit seein's believin'."

Antrim stared down into the hand and swore. Very soft; the sound scarce a breath in the canyon stillness. On the man's cupped palm lay the flash of metal, the sun's hot gleams striking back from it brightly. A badge lay there. An emblem of justice. The badge of a ranger.

ANTRIM STOOD, stiffly cocked, with his eyes pale cracks and listened to the roll of the wind through the pine tops. "I didn't know," he said tight lipped, "they enlisted crooks in the Texas Rangers."

"They don't," Sundance said. "I ain't enlistin' you. All I want from you is a little help. Back my hand and—"

"Back your hand or get arrested, eh? Get put in the Tombstone jail till they hang me—"

"Don't talk like a fool. I told you once your affairs don't concern me. For all I care you ain't never been here. Anyways, a Texas badge—"

"Would work out fine...if you had me in Texas. Might even work all right if you could get me to Tombstone. You could easy tip me off to John Slaughter."

Sundance said with a rasp in his tone: "I'm here after horses—if all the crooks in the Territory was here it wouldn't be no skin off *my* nose! I'm here after A-rabs; a couple hot-blooded broncs that was stole off a Mexican—some bean-eatin' Don with a hold on the Government. Lorenzo Enrico Porfiro Fanegas y Lugo—some mouthful!"

"If pipe dreams was dollars—"

"This ain't no dream! The damn fool's offered five hundred dollars to the gent that'll bring 'em back—an' no questions! The request came—"

"Why dont you get old Jake to help you? He knows the country—might even know who stole your horses. He told me quite a spell back there was horse runners working this trail again. He could find his way around here with his eyes shut—"

"The man I need's got to keep his eyes open." Sundance's grin was hard and persuadingly confident. "You've got yours open all the time, bucko." Some deviltry of thought sent its darkening sparkle through the slant of his stare. "Let's cut out the sparrin' and get down to business. I need you, and it looks like you could use me. What the hell are you throwing dust for? You oughta be glad to work with the Rangers. Damn it! One word from me—"

"Exactly, "Antrim said. "One word."

Sundance snorted.

Antrim said, "Ill hand it to you for one thing—you're tough, all right. Gritty as fish eggs rolled in sand. 'One word' says you—and to me, at that! If I had good sense I'd put a slug through you."

Sundance chuckled. "You ain't built that way. If you was really guilty of what you're charged with, I might think different. Hell! you got nothing to lose by helping me. If you want to skip out after I've got those horses *I* won't stop you. You'd be a fool to do it; but you won't find *me* campin' on your shirttail. What do you say? Is it a deal?"

"What about this Zwing Hunt business?"

"What about it?"

"You making a try—"

"Hell! you ain't believin' that, are you? You don't really figure there *is* any loot, do you?"

Sundance looked at him, shook his head. "By Gawd! I didn't think nobody but crackpots like Jake put any real stock in that flight of fancy. All the treasure you find you can pin on your eyebrow. Treasure! My Gawd!"

Antrim scowled but said nothing.

SUNDANCE put a hand on his shoulder. "I've been packing the star for a good many years, King. I've seen a good many tough ones—known a lot of them personally. But I've never seen any that could boast one dime when the time came round to cash in their chips.

He backed off, shook his head. "Yeah. I can see you've got it about as bad as Jake. This guy Boucher you mentioned the other night—I hate to think of all the time he's spent hunting that rainbow that Zwing Hunt painted. I don't suppose you ever knew Zwing Hunt? As an outlaw he wasn't worth shucks. I knew him when he was hauling lumber for Morse's sawmill. He made a heap of big brags, did a lot of swaggering, but when it come to gunplay or cutting real dides he wasn't much better than a tinhorn gambler. Billy Grounds hadn't no more weight than Hunt had; he got killed when he wasn't hardly more than nineteen. They tried to stick up the stamp mill at Charleston. They stepped into the office just about dusk. There was three men sitting in the office talkin'—no, four, the mill manager, Peel—the chief engineer, a fellow named Cheney, and Hunt—the assayer.

Zwing Hunt and Billy Grounds stepped in wearing masks. They never said 'Boo!—just stepped in the door and opened up. Peel dropped, dead. The other three dropped down back of the counter. Hunt and Grounds got spooked and went larruping off without even pausing to do any robbing. They cut their stick for the Stockton ranch. Breakenridge, Young, Gillespi and some other deputies got on the trail and took after them. They caught up with them at the ranch. Hunt killed Gillespie, wounded Young. Grounds shot a fellow named Allen. Breakenridge killed Grounds. Breakenridge put a slug through Hunt's back, knocking him down. But he jumped up again and went crashing through the brush. He didn't get far though. The posse got him and took him back to Tombstone. He got away later, skipped out with Bill Hughes.

"What I'm trying to point out—does he sound...Well, here. Let me give you the rest of the story. Hughes and Hunt turned up after a spell at Buckles' ranch in Pole Bridge Canyon. They stayed three weeks while Hunt's wound heeled over. Meantime, his brother, Hugh, came up from Texas and joined Zwing there. Zwing and his brother took out for Mexico. A few days later the brother rode in to Camp Price on the southern side of

the Cherrycows an' told the Lieutenant, Zwing had been killed by Indians. A party of scouts was sent back with Hunt to locate Zwing's body. They found the camp—found a dead man and buried him. On a juniper tree they cut Zwing's name and the date."

Sundance grinned. "I'd like to know when he talked to his uncle. I'd like to have a picture of him making that map."

Antrim shrugged. "You can talk till hell freezes—"

"Yeah. I know it. An' you'll still believe in that Curly Bill cache. You an' Jake Gauze and all the rest of 'em. Well, it's no skin off my nose—believe what you want, just so you give me some help locating them horses. How about it?"

"Right now," Antrim said, "I've got to ride to town."

"That's all right with me. I've got a few things that need tending myself. You'll be back all right. Any guy—"

Antrim said, "I'll be back."

16

SLASHED HOBBLES

ANTRIM had expected to see the girl's shoulders droop—had expected to find her, if not resigned, either outwardly angry or inwardly seething. She was none of these things.

She was a strange, deep woman with dark, somber eyes that yet showed no resentment as she observed the passing sights of the outtrail. Perhaps her business with Jake was finished; perhaps she had no reason for longer staying there. She may have been just as well pleased to be leaving the place.

Most women, he thought, would have used this ride to better advantage; would at least have lightened the miles with tongue oil. Lolita did not. She answered when he spoke to her, civilly, pleasantly, but made no effort to keep the talk going.

She was self contained.

She wore, in this sweltering heat, a dark riding skirt and light shirtwaist. She wore a broad-brimmed, chin-strapped hat on her hair, a Stet hat garnished with a bright red feather. Her delicate features were clear as a cameo; they could be, he thought, as reserved as one, also. Just the same, he decided, there was spirit to this girl; behind the serenity—the cool composure, she was fire and flame, an emotional volcano that could loose devastation if ever for a moment she let go of herself.

But that was just it—she didn't; or she hadn't, at least not so far as this trip was concerned. She maintained a taciturn aloofness, appearing friendly enough, quite content with the silence, making no attempt either to trade on her sex or on their present relationship.

He found this odd in a woman. The riddle roused his interest. He wondered again what had brought her out here.

The sun was sinking red behind the blue Dragoons when she said abruptly, "You had better get out of this...Antrim."

He looked at her quickly but got no satisfaction from the look. "Get out of what?"

She remained silent a moment. She said with a lift of her shoulders, "You did not go out there because Jake 'ave ask you."

"Why do you think I went out there?"

"I think you went out there to hunt for treasure." She turned then and faced him. "You would not be the first. Many have gone to find that treasure; that buried plunder Zwing 'Unt 'ave tell about. Poor, foolish people that think to find what 'as never been. Gold and silver and jewels and statues—what a craziness must 'ave been in his head. It was the fever, of course."

"Of course," Antrim said; and she smiled at him.

"You do not believe that. You are

like those others who 'ave come to Jake's; you 'ave hear that tale and you will not res' till you 'ave looked yourself. But there is no gold, no silver, no statues—nothing is there only greed and hate. And death for those who go on with this madness. Believe me; I know—I can feel it here." She laid a hand on her heart and looked at him.

She looked at him fully, her lips seeming to hesitate on the edge of speaking. Then she shrugged, looked ahead and said no more to him.

* * *

AT SEVEN o'clock they camped in a pocket. Antrim hobbled the horses and cooked the few things the girl had brought with her. They ate in silence; afterwards the girl rolled up in her blankets and slept.

Antrim sat by the fire with his pipe and his thinking; he reviewed the things Sundance had told him, the man's proposition; Jake's proffer of partnership. Jake was after something—Hunt's map, most likely. Cope wanted that map. Perhaps Sundance, too, despite his asserted interest in horses. One of them had it, but which one? Jake or Cope? And where did this gambler, Pete Spence fit in? Was he, too, after the Curly Bill cache? Or had he come, as he said, merely hunting Cope?

Who had stolen those horses? Antrim had thought at first it would prove to be Jake; that Jake had been stealing horses and had hired him to ward off revenge from their owners. Now he was not sure. He was beginning to suspect Idy Red of stealing them. Idy Red with her tomboy ways—with nothing to do with her idle time but rove these hills and long for the city. She was not the kind to stay shut in a house; she must know that canyon's every nook and cranny.

Suppose Jake was right in his claim about horse runners. Idy Red would know if they were using the Trail. She could have seen the two Arabs and fallen in love with them. She might even have gotten them away from the horse thieves; a girl of her temperament and knowledge *could* have. Her prowls through the canyon would have discovered the cove—it might even have been a rendezvous for her, a place of communion, the stage for her dreams. Unless the thieves themselves had hidden the horses there, Antrim thought, it must have been Idy Red who had done it. They would have represented something to bestow her affection on, and would give to her lonely rambles new pleasure and purpose; they would give her starved soul a new interest in life.

Having incurred Idy Red's hostility, Antrim, in riding off as he had, might easily have roused her suspicion. She would have experienced no difficulty in following him; perhaps Kerrick's claybank was already saddled. Idy Red wore small boots. She may have taken that shot at him.

She was a willful girl; wild primitive, impulsive; she may even have killed Bat Kerrick....It was time, Antrim thought, to take stock of the chances, to rescan the issues and the obstacles presented.

* * *

THE CRASH of the shot gagged the night with its clamor. It pulled Antrim out of his dozing; yanked him onto his knees, gun lifting, eyes raking the roundabout gloom for a target. Habit took hold then and flung him backwards, out of the flare of the fire's dying embers. He crouched there, tight cheeked, hearing the echoes break and run, hearing them die out, faintly, remotely.

The shot had come from beyond the pocket. From beyond that intervening ridge to the left that rose with its brush like a roach-maned scalp against the star-sprinkled pit of the night beyond. There was no further sound from those stygian shadows. The silence crawled back and curdled, congealed.

Antrim stayed in his tracks, crouched, alert, until certain that whatever the play he had caught the tag end of it was over and done with. For this installment, leastways. Nothing was ever done with, really.

A damp, ground chill had settled in the pocket. He looked toward Lolita, and all the muscles of his face pulled tight and warped. The blankets lay where she'd been curled up

in them; but she was not in them now....She was not in sight anywhere.

Trap's smell was strong in his mind when Antrim quartered across to the blankets. He stopped a little short of them and skinned his ear for what the night might tell him; but it told him nothing. There was nothing to hear but the pattering sound of a breeze lightly rummaging its way through the greasewood.

He moved in closer. A match rasped to flame on the edge of his thumbnail. It showed Antrim's face in tight planes and dark shadows as he bent and with bleak gaze studied the ground, swiftly reading the tale of bent grass and scuffed humus. He wondered then why his horse had not snorted.

The horses were gone. He found the cut hobbles.

17

RACKET AND BANG

ANTRIM spent the rest of that night in the pocket; but at the first gray of dawn he was up, reading sign, crouched thoughtfully scowling above the girl's blanket.

There were tracks aplenty. Some were sharply defined. Boot tracks, all of them; tangled and scuffed tracks, a few overlapping. He backtracked the incoming pair to the trail where they petered out on the shaley hardpan. Till he lost them they had shown pretty plain, as though their wearer had moved with exceeding caution, pausing long moments with each taken step.

He saw where the girl had been dragged from her blankets—saw the long, gouged furrows left by her heels. Found a place where the tracks showed plain sign of struggle. It seemed strange, he thought, he had heard no cry; that there had been no excitement on the part of their horses. There had been no excitement of this kind. The horse tracks displayed an unruffled calm.

But a curious light came in Antrim's stare when he found the place where, by the sign, the girl had been swept from her feet and carried. To insure her silence at this point her abductor would either have had to gag her or keep one hand clapped across her mouth. There was no sign that the man had done so. The tracks showed heavier, more plainly indented from the added weight. But they did not wabble. They did not lurch or stagger. Of course the man *might* have gagged her, but Antrim could find no sign suggestive of it and there were only two other alternatives possible which might account for the singular appearance of this solitary set of outgoing tracks.

There was one other odd thing about this vanishment. Lolita's left boot would have matched exactly the print he had found by the trail at the horse cache. So would the boot of the girl's abductor. As alike they were as the proverbial peas.

* * *

THE HORSES were gone, but the pair had not taken them.

Antrim saw by the sign where the man had come up, cut their hobbles and quietly, leisurely, hazed them off. He followed this sign near a quarter of a mile, at which point the man had coolly stampeded them—larruped them off toward the Cherrycow Mountains. "Figurin', I reckon, if I followed sign this far I'd keep right on with the hope of catchin' 'em."

He smiled at the thought; smiled leanly and nodded.

It was a pretty good bet those horses would circle, would make a big loop and cut back toward the ranch—or would they?

Antrim's scowl heralded sudden remembrance. They'd have cut back all right if they'd been Jake's horses. But the claybank Antrim had ridden was Kerrick's. The girl's horse was her own—and she lived at Tombstone. It would be pretty certain to return to town. Lord only knew where Kerrick's would go.

Antrim, scowling, broke out a few cusswords.

He looked at the sky. It was shot with pink above the Peloncillos. He had better be moving. When the sun came up it was going to be hot. Hotter than yesterday for a man caught afoot. There was a good twenty miles between himself and Jake's place.

Walking in high heeled boots was no sinecure. It was not so bad as he had heard it described, but it was a mighty far thing from being a pleasure. It stimulated bitter thoughts in a man. He wondered now if Jake hadn't had some better reason for sending him off than the one he'd mentioned.

He got to thinking finally about the shot that had wakened him. What part had it played in last night's didos? Why was it fired and who had fired it? No slug had struck in his vicinity; he had not even heard the bullet. Just the shot and those raveling, ridge-broken echoes.

Had the girl got a gun—tried to get herself free again? It did not seem likely the man would have killed her, not after the trouble he'd been to snare her.

Antrim, swinging along at a ground-eating stride, began to feel warm before he covered two miles. Sweat broke out on his back and forehead. Where pants and shirt met beneath his belt he was wringing wet and the sun hadn't even got above the peaks yet.

It was going to be hot.

It *was* hot. There wasn't any breeze at all this morning. The scrub oak leaves hung limp and lifeless. What birds he saw stood with open mouths, their songs forgotten in this wilting heat.

He realized he was thirsty, and then, all of a sudden, his thirst was forgotten. All his attention was caught, held bleakly. He stopped, eyes wide on the dusty trail, on the hoof sign stamped there. On a horseshoe's imprint...a hind shoe, carelessly set.

It was this queer mark he had seen at the horse cache. This was the track Kerrick's claybank left. Kerrick's claybank...the horse he had yesterday ridden from Jake's. Only now it was going in the other direction, going *toward* Jake's...

* * *

GOING toward Jake's. Antrim stood and stared in a clammy sweat while confused thoughts pelted his mind with their questions.

Many hoofs had churned the dust of this trail; its adobe surface was like windrowed flour, only gray instead of white, but entirely compatible with four's consistency. The tracks of Kerrick's big claybank were plain. They were the last to cross this impressionable surface. Antrim traced them back, saw where they'd come onto it out of the brush—saw a great deal more. The tracks of another horse mingled with them, the latter sometimes overlapping them, which suggested the claybank was following this other horse; it was probably the girl's.

It was then he saw the dainty print of boots and had all he needed to uncork his temper. He cursed, then loosed a laugh from lips sourly twisted. The girl had fooled him proper! She had gauged him right and hung it onto him. She'd been no more kidnaped than he had; it had all been a lie, built and played for his benefit. It was the only possible answer. With this supposition all the queer angles fell neat into place.

Lord, but that girl was a smart one! Give the hellcat her due and be done with it. She had taken him in like the greenest lout of a brush popper; had built a loop and jumped him through it. While he'd hunched there dozing beside the fire she had staged this show to rid herself of him—and had done it, too!

Damned well she had done it. By the sign he was anyway six hours behind her, and losing more every passing moment.

No wonder he'd thought those tracks a little odd; the same pair of boots had made every one of them. Lord! the work she had gone through to fool him—to make it seem she'd been snatched away from him!—to get herself free, screened from observation.

He marveled at the amount of

thought required to conceive and execute the hoax she had played. Out of all proportion to the possible gain—or *was* it? That could not be appraised till one knew what use she had put to these hours; till one knew what was back of the use she put to them. It was apparent she had been of no mind to be watched....

Antrim scowled and grunted, bodefully shook his head. Of even that much he could not be sure. She was up to something. That was all he knew. She did not wish him to think she had left him deliberately, which argued she expected to see him again. Perhaps she aimed to come back, once her purpose was achieved, with some tale of having escaped from the ruffian. Perhaps...

There was one thing, though, he could rest assured of; she had needed privacy, and had been of no mind to have anyone know it. Else she'd not have bothered to stage this act; she'd have simply slipped off and let him think what he wanted.

* * *

SOME PRIVATE need for privacy was bound to be the motivating force of her actions. The key—every move she made was stamped with it. Jake must have given her the horse she was riding. A turned-loose horse naturally makes for home; she had known that, too, and had counted on it. She'd been trying to sell Antrim a definite impression. Since the impression was false there was no horse for her need but the ones they had come on.

At their first aquaintance she had twice named Tombstone as the place she customarily thought of as home. Antrim doubted, now, they had ever met in Tombstone; he became sourly skeptical of everything about her—particularly of that 'Flying Nymph' background. She was no more Lizette than the man in the moon; that was just another slick impression she had sold him.

But she knew this country. Knew its background, its people. She had recognized *him*, though nobody else had. He'd have bet his bottom dollar just then it had been this girl who had tipped off Sundance.

She had expected Antrim to keep on toward Tombstone—a far piece off, while she returned to Jake's.

Oh, she was smart, all right. Uncannily smart. She had shown a real flair in stampeding those horses; had gauged to a turn how far they would bolt before circling. It seemed preposterous to believe this—yet how could you doubt the facts of those tracks? Those tracks said the girl had shortcut to this place and confidently waited for the broncs to come up with her. Even the shot that had roused him was motivated, intentionally fired to give effect to her acting, to endow it with color—to breathe life into it and made it seem real.

She had made one slip, a very little one. This thing by which he had finally caught up with her—this matter of a claybank's left hind shoe. She couldn't have known he would take Kerrick's horse; it wasn't likely she knew about that bad hind shoe. If she *did* know, she'd not have much reason to suspect *him* of knowing.

Looking off across that dun-yellow valley, across the empty, heat hazed miles between a cool, thin smile touched Guy Antrim's lips.

She had left him afoot without water or sustenance—afoot in a country where a man's means of travel was traditionally held sacred. She had left him, deliberately, on the lap of the gods, caring little for his fate just so she was rid of him.

She wasn't rid of him—not yet, by Gawd! It was a notion that would probably come to her. When she saw him again. Tonight. At Jake's.

If it had been her desire to get rid of him she would better have put a bullet through him...or that eight-inch blade that had done for Kerrick.

* * *

IT WAS history repeating itself, he thought.

It was not so late as it had been that first time—that night he had come up this trail with Jake. Three minutes or so on the near side of dark. But the lamp was there in the ranch house window, a lemon-pale glow, blackly sharpening the lines of the brush before it.

A lifting breeze whimpered through the cottonwoods; the purl of the creek was a low, strangled gurgle.

Odd how often things shaped to a pattern.

He was lifting an arm when he heard the shot—the racketing bang of a pistol's explosion.

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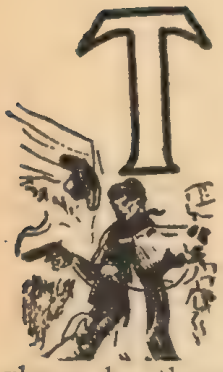
SLAUGHTER



THE WIND of that shot beat against his cheek, threw the drone of its song in his ears like a hornet. Hard on its heels—even as he was whirling, a second gun hammered the night with its death call.

In the felted gloom by the stable's corner something blurred into movement. Something struck the ground heavily and was instantly quiet. Temper sent Antrim unthinkingly toward it, ignoring the lifting clamor of voices.

He lunged for the stable, plunging crazily into the shadows surrounding it. He passed the dark entrance and raced for the corner, rounding it just in time to catch a leaping shape that struck at him, desperately, frantically, trying to break free of him. He could feel the surge of the caught one's muscles; heard the rip of cloth—almost lost his hold of him. He jammed his gun against the fellow's middle. "Now—"

"Mother of God!" came the anguished cry. "Do not hold me, King—unloose me! Hurry!"

"Oh!" You again, is it?" There was a grim satisfaction in Antrim's tone. "What you trying to get shut of *this* time?"

Lolita said swiftly: You don't understan'—"

"I will. What you got in your fist there?"

He felt her draw back—felt a sharp tension grip her. She thrust the hand he was after behind her, away from him. He couldn't quite see what it was she was hiding. She was like an eel. He had to drop his gun to even keep hold of her.

The force of his effort wrung a cry from her. She cursed him bitterly; increased her twisting. The clamoring voices were nearing them rapidly. The sound inflamed her. Brought new strength to her frantic struggles.

The rush of her words came up at him fiercely. "Let me go, you fool! Must you spoil everything with your insufferable meddling? Let go, I say—at once! Before that crazy Jake—*here!* take it, then—*take it!*"

Something cold and hard was thrust into his hands; and that way she left him, left him standing there, foolishly, holding it.

A big barreled pistol. There was a gunpowder smell to it.

* * *

THE VOICES surrounded him.

Someone lifted a lantern; lowered it carefully through an infinite quiet. A harsh voice said: "Who is this man?" and Antrim suddenly realized the night had turned cold. There was ice in the air and the ice, someway, had gotten into his bones.

He looked at the man who had spoken and remembered again that same voice saying, "My name is Slaughter—John Slaughter." This was the man who had said that to him in the *Crystal Palace bar,* at Tombstone. He was a man who took a real pride in his boots; he looked strangely out of place here in his expensive, immaculate tailored clothes. But his eyes were the eyes of a range man and must proclaim him such wherever he went.

He seemed always to have a cigar in his mouth; there was one there now, clamped between his white teeth, and a pearl-butted six-shooter tucked in his belt.

Slaughter cleared his throat and said "Well?" impatiently; and Jake Gauze hurriedly told him: "We don't rightly know, Sheriff. He...ah... called 'imself 'Cope'—"

"I know all about Cope," Slaughter

said through his teeth. "I'm referring—"

"Oh—*him?*" Sundance drawled. "Why, that's Jake's range boss— 'Antrim'."

Slaughter's head didn't turn but his eyes did. "I say—I say tell it in your own way, Antrim, but don't give the whole night over to it."

Antrim was caught in the grind of his thinking. It was the smugness of Sundance's grin that roused him. He wheeled his heel to meet Slaughter's gaze. "Over to what?"

John Slaughter said carefully, "When one fellow shoots another one he generally has some reason back of it."

Antrim's glance met the sheriff's straightly. "I ain't been shootin' nobody."

"Then what are you doing with that gun in your hand? And how does it happen Cope's lying there dead?"

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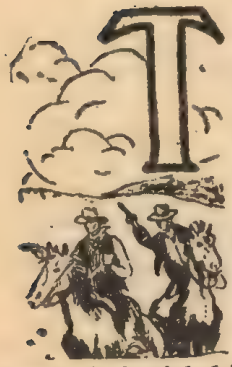
"COLOR DON'T COUNT—"



THE ONLY sound was the rasp of men's breathing.

Antrim's glance, hard as agate, followed the swing of the sheriff's hand—followed the glint of the ring on his finger, and he saw Taiban Cope, that pale worm of a man, sprawled with his face half hid in the dust. Death gave him less of dignity then even his life and profession had managed. One hand, fingers spraddled, lay near his hat. The other hand, and its arm, was doubled under him, naught of it showing but the edge of an elbow. One pantsleg was pulled halfway up his knee. Blue veins patterned the exposed, bony shank and, aside from these, it was bare as a baby's.

Antrim's eyes came enquiringly back to the sheriff. "Sorry, Slaughter, I don't know anything about it," he said.

Somebody lifted the lantern again. The sheriff's black eyes showed a look of temper. "You heard the shots, didn't you?"

Antrim nodded.

"What were you doing with that gun in your hand?'

"Is—" Antrim saw Pete Spence come into the lantern light. There was a gleam of malevolence in Spence's rheumy eyes. "No use tryin' to make us think you jes' picked it up," Spence said. "Taib's been missin' that gun ever since you pulled out."

"Pulled out?" Slaughter said.

Jake cut in before Spence could speak. "I sent Poke into town t' fetch you. I allus try t' he'p the law all I kin: we had a killin' out here thet I figured you'd ort t' know about."

Slaughter's black eyes bored a hole through Jake. "Am I understandin' you to say there's been somebody *else* killed?"

A slow wind ruffled Jake's lank hair. The flaps of his vest swayed a little and dropped. "Sure has." He spat, flicked a thumb toward where Sundance's shove was propelling Spence forward. "There's your chicken, Sheriff; 'Jest ast an' ye shall be answered'."

Slaughter seemed to see not only the things in front of him, but those on both sides and behind him, too. He was a man you could seldom catch napping; nor did Jake's maneuvers catch him napping now. His black eyes swiveled a look at Spence. He rolled the stump of his smoke between his teeth and returned his attention to Antrim. "If you're tired of holding that gun I'll take it."

Antrim shrugged and passed over the sixshooter.

Slaughter said to Spence, "Who'd you kill, Pete?"

"I didnt kill nobody."

Slaughter's look flashed from one to the other of them. What he thought was not made apparent. He said to Antrim: "I guess—I guess you better be telling me about *this* killing." He nudged Cope's body with the toe of his boot.

"Sorry," Antrim said. "I didn't even know Cope was dead till you told me."

"Where was you at when you heard the shots?"

"Back there on the trail."

"What'd you do?"

"Well," Antrim said. "I s'posed they were fired at me. The first one come within a inch of my ear. I saw what I took to be somebody ducking —over here where we're standin'. I come over here hellbent to find out."

"That all?"

"Thats about all. There was somebody here. I grabbed for 'em—lost 'em; then you come up."

JOHN SLAUGHTER considered. "What about this pistol? Pete says it was Cope's. You got anything you want to add to that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I got it away from the guy I was fightin' with."

Slaughter tucked the gun in his belt with his own gun. "Pete," he said. "I say—I say—"

"No need to waste time asking him questions," Sundance murmured. "He's already confessed to the killing. Jake's got his statement all signed and ready for you."

"And who are you—where do you come into this?"

Sundance laughed it off with an easy politeness. "Just another T.B. come West for my health."

Slaughter's opinion was not revealed in his face. "Come West from where?"

Sundance smiled. "Don't believe I mentioned."

Jake touched the sheriff's arm. "First thing Spence done when he got here was t' ast had a fella named Kerrick showed up. I told him he had. This Kerrick had come up the day before; tol' me he come fr'm El Paso —was figurin' t' ranch somewheres up aroun' Prescott. I never ast him no questions. Lotsa guys drifts through this canyon. I figure t' mind my own business mostly, but I couldn't he'p noticin' there was somethin' junin' around in his head. Said he'd like t' stop a few days. I told him 'Sure—stop as long as you like.' Then Spence come along an' they was thicker'n thieves. All the time gettin' off by themselfs—takin' rides an' all. Didn't take me long t' guess what they was up to. They was huntin' around f' that Curly Bill plunder; this Kerrick fella was all steamed up. I expect Pete sold him a Zwing Hunt map—"

Spence said: "You damn liar! I never even *seen* this Kerrick jasper! Don't you never believe 'im, Mister Slaughter—I never even got here till after they'd buried him!"

Slaughter looked from one to the other of them.

Jake shook his head, tendered Slaughter a grimy, folded paper. "Would a guy sign that without he ackshully done it?"

Slaughter held the paper so the lantern would shine on it. After he read it he put it away without comment. "I say—I say how'd you happen to be out here, Pete?"

"Cope left word I should meet him here. I come to see Cope, not no damn Kerrick which I hadnt never heard of. As for that Curly Bill plunder—" malevolence flashed in the look he gave Jake, "nobody but a fool would believe that yarn no way. An' Jake knows it well as I do. He bought this ranch with the money he made sellin' Zwing Hunt maps to credulous suckers."

Slaughter waved that aside. "Where's this Kerrick man buried?"

"I dunno," Jake shrugged. "Sundance—"

"Not me," Sundance said. "Cope had the shovel; I guess Cope planted him."

Slaughter turned his look from Sundance to Antrim.

Antrim shook his head. "I pass," he said.

The sheriff nodded. "And now Mister Cope is very handily dead."

He threw the dead stump of his cigar away. He got out a fresh one and bit off its end. He gave Jake Gauze a very penetrating look.

"Pete," he said to Spence, "I'm goin' to ask you, Pete, to set up with this body; I wouldn't want to find it gone in the morning. The rest of us, I guess, had better turn in now. We

got a long, tough day ahead of us tomorrow."

* * *

There were still a good three hours before dawn when Jake Gauze, barefoot, with his spurless boots tucked under an arm, began very carefully to cross the patio. He took his way through the deepest shadows and there were times when Antrim could hardly see him; but he kept his place, thinly smiling, waiting.

He had thought Slaughter's coming would change the schedule some. The sheriff's presence was discomfiting Jake, was forcing him to alter plans he'd probably spent months on.

Anything might happen.

The sheriff's presence was discomfiting all of them. There was no man here who hadn't ample reason to fear the law's proximity. Why had Slaughter come?

Antrim recalled the circumstances which had brought John Slaughter into public service. He'd been put into office to clean up the country; the people's elected choice—the choice of a people fed up with banditry. John Slaughter, in a short three years, had a name you could do conjuring with. These countless exploits—the tales of this man's daring, furnished after-supper yarning for the campfires of the cow camps.

You might think this a little strange, for the epic days were done with, the swashbuckling breed departed. Outlawry was a withered flower—there was no romance left in it. This was an age of pilferers, a cut-and-run breed who had no stomach for the bolder ways of the generation before them. Coyotes snatching crumbs from the camp sack.

So they'd called John Slaughter from his ranching to stop it.

They had picked the right man. A man of his word, he was a cold, quiet fellow who lived under his hat; a lonely soul with no bread to butter but the crust of the law. Slaughter seldom found it necessary to draw his gun when he talked to a man. Chary of speech, men saved his words and repeated them for him, and a warning was usually found quite sufficient to move a man out or to bring him to jail. Slaughter rode alone. He was a man of his word, unique and deadly.

He wasted scant thought on hair-line distinctions. With little trust in courts and juries, he had unbounded confidence in his own views of justice. He frequently ordered men out of the country—never troubling to order them twice. He was 'plain blue hell' on horse-thieves. When he set out after a stolen horse he always returned with it—no one ever remembered him bringing a thief back.

Antrim was not surprised to see Jake stampeded. The sheriff's coming was a handwriting Jake could read. He was fixing to move and he aimed to move fast—he *had* to, faced with the presence of Slaughter. John Slaughter was the kind who played for keeps.

JAKE HAD not quite half crossed the patio when Antrim saw a second blurred shape detach itself from the gloom and glide after him. Antrim could not tell whose this second shape was, but he rather inclined toward belief it was Sundance. Whoever it was, he stopped when Jake stopped, bent where Jake bent, and in every way moved like he was old Jake's shadow.

Eyes narrowed watchfully, Antrim followed. Jake reached the living room door. Stepped through it. Antrim watched the second shape pause by the door, seeming to hesitate, to be cautiously gauging things. Then, abruptly, he too was dissolved into blackness.

Antrim came to the door. There was a flicker of light in the room beyond. It came from a match in a man's cupped palm. The palm was Jake's—the match was, too. The second still shape belonged to Sundance. Close to Antrim, he was poised by the table, his gleaming eyes following Jake's every move.

Gauze was crouched by the chimney, bent by the mantel that was hood for the fireplace. He had a bony arm far thrust up the chimney.

When he brought it down Antrim coldly said: "I'm obliged to you, Jake

—I surely am. I figured that map was plumb lost for good."

Old Jake crouched there, still as a statue.

But Sundance chuckled. "I thought you'd be getting your nose into this —I'd of bet my last dollar on it."

"Never mind the gab—an get your hand away from that pistol. Try that match on a lamp wick, Jake."

Jake lit the lamp on the mantel. The wheel of his head was without expression. His cheeks showed nothing; the flats of his face were blank, inscrutable.

"Well?" Sundance drawled. "We goin' to do us some knittin' or tat awhile?"

"I think," Antrim said, "We'll get down to business. Who killed that gambler?'

"Cook Robin, likely." Sundance sniffed. "What do you care?—that's Slaughter's problem."

"It sure is, mister. An' Slaughter'll be quick to see one of us killed him."

"I dunno," Sundance said, "as I agree to that. You admit, yourself, you found someone crouched over Cope when you—"

"I did," Antrim said, "but I didn't *say* so."

Sundance's lids narrowed slightly. Then he laughed in a way that jarred on the silence; and Jake Gauze shivered, though sweat was a glistening dew on his cheekbones.

"The point," Antrim said, "is that Slaughter'll keep on till he's got to the bottom of it. You won't find that pleasant or profitable, either—mebbe you figure that *badge* will protect you?"

Sundance smiled thinly. "What do *you* figure?"

"I figure you got that badge off a dead man; I'm allowin' you ain't got no right to it, mister."

The grin widened out across Sundance's cheeks, widened till it suddenly showed his dimples. "But color don't count if the colt won't trot. If I was in your boots I'd be keepin' my mouth shut. Savvy?"

There was a cool amusement in Sundance's drawl; and a mocking edge of that same wry humor jeered from the twisting curl of his lips. His look was entirely, sarcastically confident. He caught out his pistol. With a jaunty finger careless thrust through the trigger guard he gave it a couple of nonchalant twirls; this dexterity in Curly Bill's day having gone by the name of the Road-agent's Spin. It was by this trick Marshal White got killed, Bill pretending to proffer the gun, butt first, then giving it a flip and, pronto, firing the instant the butt touched his palm.

The gun now twirling in Sundance's hand came abruptly to rest against *his* palm, and the gleam of his eyes laughed across its barrel.

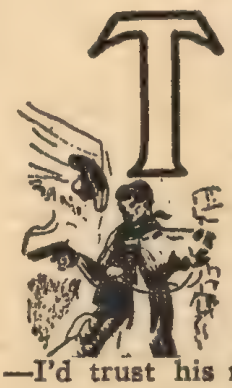
But Antrim was not impressed. He said: "I'll do as I like," and Sundance holstered his gun with a chuckle.

"I figured you would. Some guys had to get hit with a mallot before you can get anything through their heads. Well, Jake, if that's Zwing Hunt's map you've got, bring it over."

Jake's gray cheeks were like pounded putty. He said through his teeth: "I ain't got it—*honest*," and his E-string voice jumped into a wail. "I put it there—right there in the chimney—but it ain't there now! Some slinkin' son's come an' *stole* it!"

20

LAMPLIGHT



THE EDGE of Jake's tongue rasped across dry lips; silence piled up and you could almost hear it. "Hones' t' *Gawd!*" Jake said, and shuddered.

"Oh, well," Sundance smiled. "Poker Face here can remember the details —I'd trust his mem'ry any old day. I'm trustin' yours, too, Jake; ain't you flattered?"

Jake tried to grin but the result was ghastly.

Antrim said to Sundance: "What

do you care about Zwing Hunt's map?"

"Im figuring to have me a look at that plunder—"

"Plunder! My G a w d," Antrim quoted, "I didn't think nobody but crackpots put any stock in *that* flight of fancy!"

Sundance chuckled. "I've changed my mind—this treasure colie's catchin'." He looked at Jake. "You was a Curly Bill man, I've heard—pretty close friend of Zwing Hunt's, too, wa'n't you? I expect you know pretty well where it's buried.

"You ain't dug it up because you didn't want to split it; you figured to hog the whole works for yourself but you can't outlast every guy that's heard of it. It's a cinch you'll have to split it with *some*body. Might's well be us. I say it *better* be us. You got just two chances, as I see it, Jake. You can keep your mouth shut an' pray like the devil, or you can open your heart an' take a third share healthy."

It was amply plain Jake wasn't much suited; it was also plain he'd reached the end of his rope. Bitterness twisted the warp of his cheekbones. He toyed with his vest flaps and made up his mind. "What d'ye think I know?"

"I think," Sundance said, "you know where that mountain is. An' I ain't talking about Mount Ararat, neither. Bear it in mind. I've took off you about all I aim to."

Jake's smile was the sickly kind a man shows his dentist. "I knows—I know," he said wearily.

Antrim watched him stoop and pull on his boots. The man had aged since they'd met in Tombstone. He looked more gaunt, more gone-to-seed, someway, as though big Sundance were a blight laid on him. Jake's reaction to Sundance was a phenomenon Antrim never failed to notice.

Antrim said: "What's that tinhorn, Spence, hangin' round here for? Thought you run him off—"

"He come back." Jake sleeved his face, slewed his glance around nervously. "Right after Slaughter—"

"Yeah. What brought Slaughter out here?"

"Said he come huntin' hosses."

"You mean 'stolen' horses?"

"He had thet look when he tol' me about 'em."

"Does he know who stole them?"

"I guess *you* know," Sundance said with a chuckle.

"I could hit him, I reckon, if I put my hand out."

Sundance laughed. Without sound. Like an Indian. "Always figured you was smart," he said. "Guy *had* to be smart to pull what *you* did. I guess you an' me understand each other. You wouldn't have such luck with John Slaughter, bucko."

Lean of mouth, Antrim smiled.

JAKE STARED, suspicious, from one to the other of them. "All right, Jake," Sundance said. "Suppose you start with that gunslick mountain. Tell us how come no one's ever found it."

Jake seemed suddenly scared again. It was almighty odd the way Sundance worked on him. It wasn't just talk—no mere threat of words; it wasn't an attitude. There wasn't a bit of suggestion in Sundance's look. There was no menace at all; nothing sinister.

Yet Jake was scared. Fear had frozen the sap in him. He had the look of a frightened bronc about him, nostrils flared, dark eyes wide and glassy.

It puzzled Antrim. Eager as he was to hear what this wizened old man might tell them, he could not but wonder at his strange appearance. There was nothing to scare him in Sundance's posture, nothing at all suggestive of doom. There was a sour amsement, a kind of scornful humor in the cool black eyes Sundance fixed upon him.

It was baffling, incredible, that gaunt Jake Gauze should be afraid of this man. But he was. You could see him struggling to get hold of himself. It took a visible effort and his success was not notable. He kept fiddling the flap of his cowhide vest, trying to cover, you'd say, the shake of his fingers. He stared at the floor, at his hands, at his boot tops—at anything short of big Sundance's face.

"Well?" Sundance said.

Jake's shoulders jumped, but it got him started. "Zwing's uncle claimed Hunt called the place Davis Mountain account of a fella named 'Davis' got buried there. It don't make no diff'rence which done the lyin'—the guy's name was 'Harris'. His fam'ly was jumped by the 'Patches, an' the whole bunch was scalped an' killed there. We planted his wife'n kids with 'im. It was in '73. The's a gouged-out cave not a far piece off—y' kin see int' N'Mexico with yer naked eye."

Antrim, watching Sundance, saw the burly mans chubby cheeks faintly tighten; saw him thrust a hand through his curly black hair—saw the added brightness that raveled his stare. But Sundance's voice was entirely skeptical. "Never mind the red herrin's—"

"Y' think I'm lyin'?" Indignation colored Jake's voice. "You forgot thet gol' I dug up in the can they buried on thet owlhooter's grave? *Thet* ort t' show you I ain't hevin' no pipe dream! Look—by grab, I'll tell you! West o' the foot of Harris Mountain is Turkey Creek Canyon—y' 'member Turkey Creek, don't you? —up by Galeyville? In this windy Zwing spun he called it 'Silver Creek Canyon'; I've checked thet much. It was in Turkey Creek Canyon they buried thet owlhooter—thet's where I dug up thet can o' gold. It was under a rock, like he said, by a juniper tree—the's a han'ful of bones there yet; you kin see 'em."

Sundances tongue licked across his lips.

Jake said with an increased assurance, "Thet's as far as I'd got when you fellas come. But the's another canyon—"

He gritted a curse and whirled, hand dropping. Sundance, too, flung his shoulders round, and an upsweeping pistol gleamed in his fist as the leap of his glance found the open doorway.

A girl stood there, framed against the night. It was Idy Red, stormy eyes derisive. "She's gone," she said, and her look found Jake. "Your bird has flit from her gilded cage an' she taken that claim-jumpin' tinhorn with her. They went off on them broncs you had out in the willow brakes."

She racked her glance round and wheeled and left them.

IT LOOKED like the cords in Jake's neck would burst.... He was like a man gone blind; but passion grabbed big Sundance roughly. Wild anger darkened his chubby cheeks. He drove his voice at Jake like a hatchet. "I *told* you to get rid of that damn Spence. What in hell did you tell that slut?"

Jake stood like a witch had hold of him. His lips moved but no sound came out. His chin shook, but he stood there mute. An old man burning in his private hell.

Cheeks poisonously bloated'. Sundance cursed him. Jake went a half step back, cheeks livid.

The veins stood out like scars on Sundance; the tube of his pistol whipped to focus and Jake fell back like a cornered rat. The hands at his sides were clawlike, spraddled. No breath disturbed his slatlike chest. He crouched on the balls of his feet, eyes glinting.

Sundance, too, was bent, crouched forward. "Answer me, damn you! *What did you tell her?*"

"I..." Jake's knees struck together "I never tol' her nothin'—"

"Don't lie!" Sundance snapped through the slits of his teeth. "Don't lie to me or I'll cut your heart out. You told her somethin' or—"

"I swear I never! It was Idy Red—I tol' Idy Red," Jake said, and shuddered. "The same as what I jes' tol' you—about Zwing mixin' them names an' all— about thet canful of gold I found..."

"Gawd Almighty," Sundance said.

Jake gulped. He licked at his lips and stood there shaking. He touched a hesitant hand to Sundance. "I—I better git outa this—I better git clean outa this Territory. This is Idy Red's doin's—she done it t' spite me, damn 'er! *She's* the one spilled her guts t' that hellcat! Man's got no way t' measure the fury—"

Some dark leap of thought sheared

through Sundance's glance. He jammed the pistol back in its scabbard. He shoved past Jake, wheeling, striding porchward. He was at the door when Jake howled shrilly: "Where you off to? My Gawd, don't—"

"You damn fool! Do you think I'll let her steal me out of it?"

Sundance yanked the door open wickedly. The lamplight showed John Slaughter standing there.

21

TWENTY-THIRD PSALM

SLAUGHTER said, "Out of what?" and Sundance stopped like a sledge had struck him.

But not for long. He was a hair-triggered man in his grasp of essentials, a man in whom both mind and muscle had long been wed to lightning action. He was the kind who could make split-second decisions and must have made quite a few since coming here, as Antrim, just now, was beginning to realize. It seemed essential to Sundance that he get at once on the trail of that conniving pair who'd made off with Hunt's map on Don Lorenzo's Arabs; he was shoving forward with a hand half lifted when he caught the glint of John Slaughter's pistol.

It stopped him short, cheeks roaning wickedly. They were that way, glaring, when Idy Red, coolly scornful, rejoined the carnival. Antrim saw her, gracefully paused in the patio doorway, her eyes expressing a warm satisfaction with what she interpreted to be in the making. She was a rare one all right, and no mistake. And a heap more clever than you'd give her credit for. Already she had neatly jammed Jake's game; and by the look of her eye she had another wrench handy.

"I say—" Slaughter said; "I say 'out of what.' "

But Sundance had himself in hand again. He grinned at Slaughter and shrugged his shoulders. "Your chew's on fire," he smiled. "Here—have another," and passed the sheriff a fresh cigar.

Slaughter's left hand put the weed in his pocket. Slaughter's right hand held the pistol rock-steady. "It ain't my habit," he told Sundance bluntly, "to ask a man anything more than twice."

"Oh, that." Sundance chuckled. "Well, it did kind of rile me, an' that's a fact. I found a claim up in the hills that I reckoned no filing. I set up my markers. I made me a map of it—that was before I dropped in on Jake, you'll gather. To make a long story short—"

"You mean a 'tall' story, don't you?"

Sundance looked at Slaughter. "If you dont want to listen I'll quit right now."

"I'll fill it in for you. You were goin' to say someone stole this map, that they're on their way to jump your claim—weren't you?"

Sundance, again the serenely suave gentleman, nodded. "You've called the turn, Sheriff. I've good reason to think this Mex dame, Lolita, is the one that stole it. Anyway, she an' this Spence have lit out hotfoot."

Slaughter said, "If you're all through lyin', try tellin' the truth now."

"Suppose you tell it, if you think I'm lying."

"I can do that, too," Slaughter mentioned coldly. "As a matter of fact, this map was drawn by Zwing Hunt —not you. It purports to show where Zwing and some other fellows buried a batch of the Curly Bill loot. Ive never put much stock in that story—"

"Of course not," Sundance grinned at him; "nobody outside a halfwit would ever swallow a yarn like that."

Slaughter was short, but a powerful man, broad of shoulder, thick of neck; a stocky man—even darker than Sundance. He had thick black hair, black mustache, black beard. His eyes were black as jet, and as hard.

He had come from Texas with three herds of cattle and a brand new wife. He owned a big ranch not far from Hereford and was accounted a wealthy man in this country. Most men, in his case, would have taken things easy and let his deputies do the leg work; but if you suppose that was Slaughter's way, you're mistaken. He was the go-gettingest sheriff that ever packed a star in Cochise County.

And he was utterly fearless.

HE SAID, looking straight up into big Sundance's stare: "I'm goin' to let you go after this girl and Spence—as a matter of fact, I propose to go with you. I suggest that we *all* go." Then he said with blunt suddenness: "Did you steal those horses?"

But Sundance had a good grip on himself. He gave Idy Red a broad wink and grinned. "If you mean them horses Miz' Harris mentioned—the ones that dame an' Pete Spence skipped off on, I'd suggest you talk to ol' Jake about 'em—he knows this country a heap better'n I do. *I* didn't even know there was any willow brakes."

You never could tell what John Slaughter was thinking. His bright, black eyes showed no expression.

Old Jake's showed plenty. He'd spent the bulk of his life trailing round with hard customers; knew their ways—had traded on them, matching their slick and baited trickeries, sidestepping their traps and rigging his own. It might seem he'd have had an answer ready, but all he had was a growl in his throat. If ever a man *looked* guilty, he did.

Despite this it was Antrim's belief big Sundance had brought those Arabs out of Mexico—that Sundance, for some purpose undisclosed, had secretly hidden them out in the willow brakes, in that snug little cove so well screened from observance. "Well," Sundance repeated, "why don't you ask him?"

John Slaughter's look went blackly over him. "Mebbe I will...when I get around to it. In the meantime—"

"They're the ones you're after, I think," declared Sundance. "Jake's been tellin' me all about 'em, fact is, he's been trying to sell them to me. They're A-rabs, he says—brought 'em up from Torreon. A stud and a filly. chestnut an' gray. Don't that kind of sound to you, Slaughter?"

Slaughter tongued the stump of his smoke around. "You seem powerful anxious to get Jake hung. You wouldnt be figuring to *use* me, would you?"

Sundance laughed. "No skin off *my* nose if he gets away from you. Suit yourself."

"I aim to," the sheriff said. "You ever been up this way before?"

"I been most places. From the Peace River south to the Ri-o Grand." A twinkle tweaked through big Sundance's stare. "I been huntin' health—" he coughed robustuously. "While we're standing here gabbin' them horses—"

"Just leave me worry about them horses; I'm gettin' paid for it," Slaughter said. His glance swung to Jake. "You got any talking you want to catch up on?"

Jake licked his lips but he didn't say much. Except with his eyes.

Slaughter said, "You sure?" and Jake nodded.

Idy Red stepped out of her pose in the doorframe. "While you're saddlin' I'll shake up some grub fo' your travels."

The sheriff thanked her and they followed him out and caught up their horses. Kerrick's big claybank was in the bunch and Antrim made a quick throw and snared him. It was in his mind he might be needing that bottom before he got shut of this night's business; any moment he might feel the weight of the sheriff's hand on his shoulder. He was hard put to think why he hadn't felt it already. That he hadn't was almost worse than feeling it—which might be the effect John Slaughter was striving for.

Of one thing Antrim was mighty certain: the sheriff was no man to stamp and yell *boo!* at. He was one to be wary of every instant.

SEVERAL times since returning, Antrim had been on the point of confiding in Slaughter, of getting the sheriff aside some way and unbosoming himself of his thoughts and fancies; of describing the horse cache—the Arabs he'd found there, the shot and the boot track—the queer print of this claybank. It had even been in his mind to explain, if he had to, his *own* intentions—his reason for coming here; and, of course, that peculiar business of his trip with Lolita. But each time something had held him back—had bid him keep quiet; some hunch or foreboding he could not analyse. There was danger here; it was in the air like a pungant smell; a feel of death that curled with the breeze and could not be shaken.

There was, for instance, Idy Red's odd manner. Not her pleasure at making Jake uncomfortable—the whole push seemed to take pleasure in that; but the curious way she had eyed big Sundance. Twice tonight he had caught her watching him, without any sign of her former friendliness. Studying him, you might almost say. The look of her eyes had been distinctly probing. A kind of awe had had hold of her cheeks. Fear—perhaps loathing, had a part in shaping them; or it might have been rather a sort of cold scorn which had put that tight grim crease to her mouth. Whatever it was that had come between them, she no longer looked on Sundance with favor.

Which, some way, kind of pleasured Antrim; though he did not ask why this should be so.

It would not be long before dawn rolled around again; already the eastern rims of the mountains stood sharp and black against the graying sky and Antrim, shaking free of his thoughts, noticed Slaughter and Sundance with their heads together. Sundance appeared to be doing the talking and Antrim wondered what slime he was brewing up now.

Jake led his saddled horse past Antrim, said gruffly out of one side of his mouth, "Sundance borried thet knife from Cope jest a tail's shake of time b'fore you foun' Kerrick's carcass. Keep 'em out yere a minute. I got a chore thet wants doin'."

He kept on toward the house and Sundance, quit talking, chanced to look up and noticed. "You better watch out," his voice carried plainly. "That polecat's figurin' to cut his stick."

Slaughter called: "Antrim will fetch that grub for us, Jake."

Gauze wheeled round with a scowl and mounted. But he made no attempt to put steel to his horse. He sat there, gaunt and slack in the saddle, while Antrim clanked his spurs toward the porch gloom.

Idy Red was at the door when he got there. She gave him the bundle of grub she had fixed. Urged by some unaccountable impulse he dragged off his hat.

The porch being deep in shadows he could not tell what might lie on her cheeks. He felt like he ought to say something, ought to offer some sort of apology maybe, but for the life of him he couldn't seem to scare up the words. It had always been his opinion that acts talked loudest. After the guy was planted, saying you were sorry didn't help him any.

She seemed to be eyeing him oddly. He wondered what thoughts might be in her head as she stood there so still staring up at him. It was funny how queer she could make him feel without so much as opening her mouth at him.

Funny, and damn uncomfortable.

It began to get on his nerves. He could feel the squirm of his temper; the prickly feel of his hackles getting up. After all, he hadn't done nothing so terrible; all he had actually done was ignore her. Nothing in that to get looked at so grim like.

"I'm s o r r y," he growled, and clapped on his hat. But she caught him up like a flash. "Fo' what?"

"Well...for what I said—"

"You don't need t' be sorry fo' me," she said fiercely. "I do' want yo' damn' sorrow—I do' want yo' damn charity, neither! I do' want nothin' t' do with you. I kin shift fo' myse'f an' don't you fo'get it!"

Antrim's lip curled. "Like the way you been shiftin' with Sundance, I reckon—"and went back off the

porch with the feel of her hand stinging hot on his cheekbones.

"Don't open yo' mouth ag'in—don't you *dast* to! The' ain't no man ever tetched me yet; an' the' ain't no man ever goin' to! Now git!" she cried; and he caught the pale, shining glint of her pistol. "Git 'fore I lose my temper!"

Antrim grabbed up the bundle of food and left her, the clank of his his spurs sounding sharp and angry. He *was* angry, too; though more at himself than he was at her. At him-for daylight. Be over the Border an' fool as to *try* patching up anything with that hellcat. And it riled him bad as her hand had done to think why he ever had wanted to.

HE CAME up with the others and climbed into his saddle. He had an idea Jake peered across at him sharply; but it didn't seem likely they'd heard what she said and it was a cinch they couldn't have seen much, either. So it riled him all over when Sundance said: "Didn't she have no kiss for you, bucko?"

Antrim whirled his horse with a wicked bit. He looked big Sundance hard in the eye. "If it's trouble you're wantin' just say that again."

"The Lord is my shepherd,'" quoted Sundance unctuously, and coolly turned his look at John Slaughter. "Ain't it time we was movin'? I'd admire to get me a shot at that tinhorn, if it's all the same to you, Mister Sheriff."

Slaughter said, "If there's any occasion for burning powder, I'll be the one to burn it; remember that. It's one of the things I get paid for."

"Well...no offence," Sundance said. "Won't nobody be burnin' powder if we don't shake it up an' get started. They got a fast pair of horses if they're the ones Jake says they are. Which way we headin'?"

"Which way would *you* head?"

"They'll get clean away if we wait for daylight. Be over the Border an' out of our reach. Looks to me," Sundance said, "like we better hit straight for the Line an' chance cuttin' 'em off."

"You won't this trip." Slaughter smiled at him coldly. "We're heading for Turkey Creek Canyon."

22

BLUE MOON

SUNDANCE exhibited a look of surprise.

"What do you mean— 'Turkey Creek'? I thought you was figurin' to hunt them horse thieves—"

"I am," Slaughter said. "Around Turkey Creek someplace. I've an idea we'll find them in 'that other canyon' Jake spoke about." He smiled at the sullen lump in Jake's saddle. "Once we sight Turkey Creek I guess Jake can find them."

It were as though he said, "I guess Jake better."

After that there wasn't much said. There didn't seem very much left *to* say. Jake rode like he was sunk beyond the reach of threats, a man deep buried in the debris of his scheming. Even the impudent wit of Sundance seemed dampened with the knowledge disclosed by those words; but he wasn't quitting. His seat in the saddle showed a mind at work, and Antrim wondered what the man would try next.

There wasn't much doubt in Antrim now that the burly Sundance had done for Kerrick. With what Jake had told him about Cope's knife it seemed pretty certain who the killer was. Of course Cope's death might be another matter, predicated on some different motive; but even here there was a pretty good chance it had been big Sundance that had managed Cope's ticket. Lolita's hand might have squeezed the trigger that had driven that fatal shot into Cope, but Sundance's brain could have contrived the reason. Sundance's brain would *gladly* have contrived it had

he sensed any need for being rid of Cope. The mere lessening by one of the number to share any plunder uncovered would have been all the reason Sundance needed.

Though the girl, of course, *might* have killed them both. She was an unknown quantity, this dark Lolita. As the look of things suggested, she might be Jake's mistress; she might also be considerable else besides. She was quick of wit; she knew this country, knew Guy Antrim was hunting small boots, as disclosed by the hoax she had used to get rid of him. And when he'd found her crouched above the dead Cope's body she'd made another clever play to rid herself of him by thrusting that gun in his hands to be found with.

Perhaps that hadn't worked out quite the way she had figured. In the usual run of events he'd have been arrested for the gambler's murder. But Slaughter was a hard one to reckon with. He was a man who kept his thoughts to himself. He appeared to care little who had killed who, or why, so long as this trail brought him up with those horses. He seemed to feel it incumbent on him to recover stolen stock. Antrim remembered the rumors of many occasions. Stolen stock and John Slaughter were almost synonymous; where the one was taken you were sure to find the other.

Yet it wasn't Lolita who had stolen those horses. It was Sundance. Antrim would have bet his life it was Sundance. The man knew entirely too much about those horses to have got it from Jake, or from any other. Sundance knew because it was Sundance had stolen them—why he even knew where they'd been stolen from; and he was no more a ranger than Luther King was.

He wondered what Slaughter would say were he to tell the sheriff of that badge Sundance packed, wondered what Sundance would say. Some brightness, probably. Some flippant insolence.

It was plain to Antrim he had not been invited here. There was no love lost between Sundance and the pair who had come here by Jake's invitation, Kerrick and Cope, both dead now and planted. And plain it was, too, that Jake had known Sundance someplace in the past. And the boots Sundance wore might well have left that track he had found by the trail at the creekbank cache of the willow-screened Arabs.

There was method here, and coherence and reason, if a man could only pull the right thread loose. There was a thought slinking round in Antrim's mind, but he couldn't hardly bring credence to it. It seemed too far-fetched, too remotely unlikely.

Yet, it *could* be so. And if it were...

In the dawn's gray light he kept sharp watch on Sundance.

* * *

IT WAS no near thing, this Turkey Creek Canyon. From the Skeleton entrance to the San Simon a man with sharp eyes can see the far twistings of the gorge through which Turkey Creek's stream solemnly gobbles its way, but by horse or Shank's Mare it's a long, hot ride. The mesquite leaves drooped in the wilting heat and Jake Gauze, sleeving his bristly face, would frequently curse it and go on muttering under his breath like a man who has lived too long alone, or a man who has reached and passed life's prime and finds little left to look forward to.

As for Jake, Antrim thought, he had cause for groaning. Whatever the schemes he had nursed of late, they were blighted now, jettisoned by things he could not control; by the Cochise sheriff, for one—John Slaughter. For the matter of that, they had all had their schemes—those obscure intentions which had brought them here; and in old Jake's eyes, like as not, they had all conspired to thwart him. Even Kerrick and Cope, who had got themselves killed; for their deaths had helped fashion this trap for him. He was a man without faith or future, a man caught up by his folly and confronted at last with the fruits of it.

They stopped, near noon, to sample

the food Idy Red had put up, to breathe the horses and take a few lungfuls of smoke while they rested. Antrim, flat on his back in the shade of some ironwood, watched the play of the sun in the clouds and thought, without pleasure, of the girl left behind.

Idy Red. How well he recalled her. The look of her eyes...of her cheeks ...her slim figure; the quick, birdlike way of her movements. He remembered the soft, drawling sound of her voice, the quick twist of her smile, her freckles. He recalled things about her he'd not even been conscious of noticing. Little things, that now were made precious by memory. He remembered the things which he ought to have said—those things he really had wanted to say, but had stifled because they'd seemed ill sounding to come from a grown man's lips. And he cursed himself, recalling the words he had used in their place, the crude ungallantries that had driven her to seek Sundance's company. And the burly man's taunt came back to him. "Didn't she have no kiss for you, bucks?"

Antrim knew that he hated Sundance.

* * *

THE LONG afternoon was well advanced and the sun's shadows were lengthening, blue on the peaks and deep mauve in the ash and sycamore timber, when their trail crossed the sign of the fugitives. The girl and the gambler had been riding hard—were a good four hours ahead of them.

There was no way of telling what Slaughter thought. His black bearded cheeks were inscrutable.

They pushed on until darkness stopped them, camped in a bowl gouged between two peaks, a grassy swale with a cold spring bubbling; and it did a man good to see the horses roll before Jake caught them up and tied them. He was a handy man with horses, and had his own way of hobbling them—a loop of rope passed around a hind foot to a stake that allowed them to graze yet anchored them.

The night was deep with shadow when they dipped again into Idy Red's pack and munched their rations in silence. It was cooler up here in the mountains, cool with a tangy crispness that put new life into saddle racked muscles; and a new thought came to plague Antrim. He had remembered Idy Red's last name, which was Harris.

"Better not smoke," Slaughter told them gruffly.

Sundance hummed a tune through his teeth and Jake Gauze shoved an oath between his, and Antrim wondered what the idea was. "Are we gettin' close to that canyon?"

No one had any answer for that, and Slaughter went over and got the rifle from his saddle and came back and sat down with it laid on his knees.

The silence became uneased with men's thoughs, with the wary, covert way of their eyes; and the shadows grew more thick and blackened and night closed in without stars or moon and no man moved for the threat of that rifle.

But it wasn't in Sundance's nature to be held quiet by anything long. "No sense," he said, "sittin' round like corpses. Let's do a little singin'. Let's build us up a fire—"

"There'll be no fire," Slaughter spoke from the murk. "No fire and no singin'. An' don't be getting no notions. Case you don't know it, I'm a damned good shot."

"I'm a good shot myself," Sundance said irascibly, "but I ain't got no cravin' to root here all night."

"We're leavin', soon as the moon gets up."

"You goin' to track 'em?" Jake blurted. "Hell! No need of us waitin' aroun' fer that. I can take you to Turkey Creek Canyon—"

"I expect you can," Slaughter said. "I can take us myself, if it comes to that. I didn't come here to hunt wild geese; I came here to get them horses."

"What's that got t' do with it?"

"If I track them I know I'll get them."

* * *

THE NIGHT got blacker and blacker. It didn't seem like the moon would *ever* get up. You couldn't see a yard in front of you and Antrim, sitting with his back to a rock, began to think they would never see the fugitives, either. But there wasn't anything to be done about it. The sheriff had made his mind up and all hell couldn't move him.

From time to time Antrim could hear Jake and Sundance fidgeting. Especially Sundance; and it pleased him to think how Sundance would look if this wait let the girl and Spence get away.

Then another thought struck him and he scowled, his mood changing. He'd been figuring there wasn't much danger of the pair getting away with the plunder; and there wasn't, of course. The fruit of the Canyon massacres had been silver bullion and 'dobe dollars. You couldn't take much of that in your pockets; and the stuff Zwing Hunt and Grounds had added had been moved to the cache in wagons. But they could easy ride off with that cigarbox of diamonds. In the end, of course, John Slaughter would catch them—he had that reputation. But in the meantime what of the diamonds? And what was to keep them from destroying the landmarks by which the plunder was to be traced to its cache? There was nothing to keep them from *moving* them.

He began to feel edgy as Sundance.

And then, suddenly, the moon came out; came out just as Slaughter had said it would. Shook free of the clouds' damp clutch at last, gilding the hollow with its argent light. Each blade of grass stood blue and clear, and so did the look on Sundance's face.

One horse was gone, and so was Jake.

23

I'LL NEVER ASK HELP—

THERE wasn't much said; but the glint of Sundance's eyes turned wicked and Antrim felt like smashing something. He sensed reason now in Jake's care for the horses; sensed reason in a whole lot of things that before hadn't held much meaning. He had known Gauze was slick as greased slobbers; but the man hadn't seemed to have the requisite nerve to try any stunt so foolhardy. Had Slaughter guessed what was up he'd have killed him—but Jake had known that chance, and had taken it. He must have moved with the stealth of a spider.

And now he had stolen a march on them.

There was a while then when Antrim saw nothing but red as he crashed down the corridors of thought opening up. With Jake sped away he could no longer doubt the tale of this treasure had truth in it; Jake had fled through the night to snatch it away, to catch up with those others—to make off with them. Why, damn his soul!—this had probably been his plan from the start! *This* was the way he had schemed to outwit them and now, by Gawd, he had done it, too! They probably had wagons at the cache, ready, waiting—they may even have had the loot dug up and packed!

No wonder, Antrim thought, Spence had still been around when he'd come back from that snipe hunt with 'Lita. The girl had diddled him neatly. Jake had never intended to be rid of Spence; Sundance and Kerrick and Cope and himself were the ones not counted to share in it. They would probably have been off long ago if Slaughter hadn't come riding

in like he had.

When the roar finally passed from his head Antrim saw that John Slaughter had gone for his horse. Sundance, too, had got his horse and was heaving his saddle up onto its back like it was Jake's neck his big hands had hold of.

As he joined them, readying his own horse—or Kerrick's big claybank, to be real precise, Antrim found himself taking stock of Sundance; he had done it so often it had become second nature. But always he found food for thought in the action. He was not yet sure, but was becoming increasingly confident, that somewhere, sometime, he and the burly health seeker had seen each other before. At any rate, one thing was sure: though it might have been Jake who had hidden those Arabs in the willow brakes, Sundance—and Sundance only, had brought them up out of Mexico. It might be his duty to tell Slaughter so—to relate, as well, the tale Jake had told of Cope lending his knife to the burly man just before Bat Kerrick's body was found.

It might be his duty, Antrim thought with a scowl, but some things came *before* duty.

And, besides, who was *he* to be shaping up tunes for a star-packer's ear? Lute King, the only man ever thrown into jail for that ill-timed assault on the Benson stage. Be like the pot scoring off on the kettle!

HE WAS the last man into his saddle but they waited for him; Slaughter's black regard and ready rifle were not to be fooled a second time. "We goin' to trail him?" Antrim asked them.

"What for?" Sundance asked. "You ain't got no doubt where he's gone, have you?"

Antrim shrugged; and they hit a fast lope on the moon revealed trail of the Mexican girl and the gambler. They had neither the mood nor the time for talk, but Antrim's mind never quit its fretting. He recalled scraps of rumor he'd heard of the gambler. Pete Spence, rumor said, was in his late forties, a tall and gaunt and taciturn man whose right name was held to be Ferguson—'Lark' Ferguson, to give it its handle. He had hailed, folks claimed, from Texas, from somewheres around the Big Bend country where, it was thought, he had killed a round score of Mexicans. Like Buckshot Roberts, of Lincoln County fame, Pete Spence was held to be a walking lead mine, salted with the bullets other people had fired at him during the hectic years of his outlaw career.

On one occasion, often cited, he'd been nearly killed by a load of buckshot he'd taken while robbing a store at Corpus Christi; he'd been shot in the head in New Mexico someplace—probably Silver City or Shakespeare, both of which places had been treated to a sample of his skill at fare and monte. He had also dealt cards at Galeyville and Charleston, where the famous Curly Bill had used to hang up his hat what time he wasn't out augmenting fortune. At the time of the Benson stage robbery he, Pete Spence, had been living in Tombstone with a Mexican woman, Antrim recalled, and had been thought to have directed Frank Stillwell and Florentino Cruz in their assassination of Morgan Earp. He was, intuition told Antrim, entirely capable of showing his teeth should he find himself backed in a corner. Nor was the girl, Lolita, of a sort to be accounted pint-size. When it came to a final reckoning, Slaughter had probably gauged events rightly when he'd hinted the possibility of gunplay.

And there was Jake yet to be considered. He had likely joined up with the others by this time. They would probably rig up an ambush. Jake could expect no mercy from Slaughter.

The killings came into Antrim's mind again, the deaths of Cope and Kerrick. He had found Lolita with Cope last night—with the gambler's dead body, to put the thing rightly. Had her's been the hand to fire that shot at Antrim? Lolita, seeing Antrim and fearing exposure, may have snatched Cope's pistol and fired at him; but who, then, had killed Tai-

ban Cope? And what exposure had the girl been afraid of? Not exposure for the hoax she had played on Antrim—that looked too far-fetched to suppose for an instant.

There'd been only one shot fired out of Cope's gun.

It was too mixed up for Antrim. It was easier and much more plausible to believe big Sundance had killed them both, killed Cope and Kerrick, for reasons best known to himself. He had, Jake claimed, borrowed Cope's knife just before Bat Kerrick was killed with it. Not suspecting Jake of knowing this Sundance might, later, have killed Taiban Cope to keep his mouth shut.

There was something about big Sundance...

He recalled Idy Red's proud words of her father— "But, dammit," he growled, "he was killed at Iron Springs—or supposed to've been, and Earp sure had plenty witnesses."

It was Sundance—brawny, dimple-cheeked Sundance, who brought their travel to a sudden halt with an arm reached out to Slaughter's bridle.

There was excitement and a bitter conviction in the way his stare swept Slaughter's face.

The sheriff's black eyes showed nothing. "Well?"

"That girl! I knew damn' well I'd seen her before!"

"I've seen her before, myself," Slaughter said. "In Tombstone—" tryin' to figure who killed 'em—Cope an' Kerrick, I mean. So've I; an' I believe, by Gawd, I've done it. It's *her!*" He said excitedly: "Mebbe she's rubbed Jake out, too—if she ain't she will if the chance comes right—it's what she's been anglin' around to! She's been makin' a play for this plunder, but—"

"What do you put in them smokes you twist?"

Sundance stared. "By Gawd," he said, "I can prove it!"

"By Gawdin' won't help you any," said Antrim; and, for a second, Sundance's eyes went narrow. But he brushed it away, declared heatedly: "If there's one thing a Mex'can never forgets, it's revenge—revenge is all that dame's lived for—revenge on them that did away with her father!"

"What," Slaughter said, "are you talking about? If you're just throwing dust to give Jake more time—"

Sundance said, "Can't you see it?"

"I might, if I knew what you was talking about."

"Jake's woman! That Tombstone slut—that *Lolita!*"

"You say someone killed her father?"

"Sure—Curly Bill's bunch killed him—eight years ago; they killed him in Skeleton Canyon—"

"What for?"

Sundance said impatiently: "For that mule train of silver his bunch was smugglin' to Tucson. Look! You got to—"

"You're right," Slaughter said with a cold, thin smile; "I've got to get after them fugitives. Come on. We've wasted time enough—"

"Wait!" growled Sundance; but Slaughter was through with waiting. He appeared suddenly consumed with a lust for speed. Putting spurs to his horse he went hard through the gloom of a scrub oak stand and Sundance, cursing, rode after him.

BUT THE burly man, Antrim decided, was right.

Against every inclination he was forced to agree with Sundance's thinking. With this girl as Don Miguel's daughter many things became clear that, before, had been closed and locked doors to him. Lolita would have been that handsome young stripling who had raced in wild flight up the canyon; she would have been that solitary horseman who had kept lone vigil on the San Luis hills. For years it had been common talk in the cow camps that some unknown nemesis was stalking the survivors of the Curly Bill gang. Like a curse, bad luck had tracked them down until at last it seemed there was none but gaunt old Jake Gauze left; and here, crouched slow-eyed and smiling, was the dusky Lolita, turned up to play Delilah to the old man's Samson.

Antrim, hurrying after the others, hadn't much doubt but that Sundance

had called the turn on her. He was still a bit puzzled however as to why she had killed Cope and Kerrick. They had had no part in the canyon massacre; or at least he had never heard they had. The girl might have had plenty of reason. Perhaps they had known her—guessed her secret. They may have tried to blackmail her. Whatever her reason, it seemed pretty evident she'd killed them. Antrim himself had come upon her attempting to flee from the gambler's dead body—attempting to flee with a gun in her hand, a gun acrid with the fumes of burnt powder.

They were following the course of a shallow wash when the sheriff held up his hand and stopped them. "Creek's just ahead—just beyond that belt of blackjack yonder. Don't let off your guns without I tell you. If I tell you to shoot, don't waste no lead. Lead costs money. So do trials, and they don't get horse thiefs hung in this county."

They moved into the canyon at a careful walk. Bear grass muffled the hoofs of their horses. The night had aged and the moon grown dim, and though no moon rays got down this far the air was gray with a pearly mist that glinted and sparkled from the grotesque shapes of the dark growth round them.

They advanced with caution. No shouts, no shots, broke the pre-dawn quiet; no racketing crash of rifles challenged them. They appeared unmarked, and marked no others. A sound of fury came out of Sundance. His look, flung at Slaughter, was accusing, intollerant. "If you'd struck for the border like—"

"Quiet!" Slaughter said, and moved forward without so much as glancing at Sundance.

The big man took it like a slap in the face. Antrim knew by the way he cocked his shoulders the urge was in him to kill John Slaughter.

Very swift and smooth Antrim laid his gun across the pommel. He thumbed back the hammer without caring who heard it. Both of them heard; and the quick, raking wheel of Sundance's shoulders was perfectly timed with Slaughter's turning. The sheriff's hard stare caught the play at once. "When I need any help I'll ask for it."

"You'll ask, all right."

"I'll never ask help from a jailbird, King."

24

THE SALTED TRAIL

ANTRIM'S eyes turned bright and narrow. The slouch of his shape in the saddle shifted; by just that fraction he stood ready for violence. "So you know me, eh?"

"Of course I know you! There's not many toughs in this country I *don't* know—none I wouldn't recognize if they set their tracks across my trail. That's one of the things I get paid for."

"And what do you propose to do about it?"

"I propose right now to get after them horse thiefs. Walk your horse ahead—you, too, Sundance."

Antrim lingered a moment while his eyes searched Slaughter's. Then he shrugged, sheathed his pistol and rode ahead. Sundance, too, took the sheriff's suggestion; and once more the three pressed warily.

Antrim murmured presently, "Looks like we've come to the end of this canyon. There's a bald, round knob stickin' up ahead—"

"Harris Mountain." Slaughter, too, put a curb on his voice. "Keep your eyes skinned now. There's a kind of gulch opens off here somewheres. Expect we'll find our friends—"

"Here it is," Sundance called. "Here's your canyon—"

"Shh!" Antrim growled; and they heard a low, far-off matter of voice sound.

Sundance sucked in his breath; leaned forward. "By Gawd," he said, "we've got 'em!"

They swung off their horses, left

them hitched to the ground. "Go on," Slaughter motioned ahead with his rifle and Sundance struck off at once without argument. He moved with the lithe, swinging grace of a couger, head thrust a little forward as though striving to pierce the gray clutch of the fog which seemed even thicker with the coming of day. Their clothes were damp with the feel of it and moisture beaded the sheriff's rifle.

A sudden, explosive grunt came from Sundance. He had stopped and was bending down over something—it was a spring and, beside it, the wreck of a wagon. Just bits of charred boards, two rusted axles and springs with, yonder, snakelike and black in the soaking grass, the twisted and mangled iron rim of a wheel.

Sundance's eyes, coming up, met Antrim's darkly. "Here's the wagon—what's left of it anyway."

His look, still insistent, grew harsh with impatience. "*You* had the map—don't you *get* it?" Sundance's hand swept round intolerantly. "This damn wagon's got up an' moved!"

Antrim saw it then. Sundance was right. This wagon was not where the map had shown it; on Hunt's map it had been between two springs.

"Go on," Slaughter prodded. "You boys mightn't recall it, but we came here to grab them horse thiefs. I guess you heard me—get movin'."

ANTRIM'S stare had been fixed on the gulch's west wall, probing to locate the 'cove' Zwing had mentioned. It was a strain on the eyes to cleave such fog and he hadn't been giving much notice to where his steps were taking him. Of a sudden something hard struck his knee—rammed pain through his groin as he stumbled. It was a rock with no least give to it; a rock roughly squared, standing three feet high.

"The sons!" Sundance snarled at him. "They've moved every damn mark Zwing left us!"

"Never mind the marks," Slaughter said. "Get movin'."

Antrim was already moving quartering off toward the wall as though there wasn't any law within miles of him. He made it forty paces by count from the obelisk to the gulch's west wall; and the map had held it to be barely three. He saw no cove, no break in the wall any place in sight. He came back into the trail again. To the rock—ran a hand across its chiseled surface, his fingers tracing the crosses cut in it.

"Well?" Sundance growled.

Antrim nodded. "They been moved all right."

"And now," Slaughter said, "we'll move ourselves." His voice was honed fine as peach fuzz. "We'll be biddin' goodbye to Hunt's fairytale map an' get on with our hunt for them horse thiefs."

They were that way, wills clashing, eyes glowering, when a rifle cracked from the swirls of the fog and the screech of the shot banged off the rock into which Zwing Hunt had cut his two crosses. So wickedly swift was Antrim's turn he saw the man's shape diving back of a tree. Three things Antrim caught with his raking stare: the man's blurred shape, a rearing, frantic pair of tied horses, and the startled, rage-filled look of Sundance.

Antrim kept his eyes on the tree; stayed crouched in his tracks, gun lifted and ready. But his mind stayed wickedly fixed on the cause of big Sundance's cursing—that terrified pair of tied horses. They were not the horses they should have been; they bore no least resemblance to the stolen Arabs. They were a pair of forty dollar cow broncs.

Antrim felt much the way big Sundance must have, reflecting how slickly they had all been diddled: and he saw in that moment where the truth must lie.

Jake Gauze had gotten the best of them. He had beautifully salted this canyon with markers; had gone off with his treasure and left them. It was plain as plain in Guy Antrim's mind they would not find Jake within miles of this place. He had not only fooled Antrim, Sundance and Slaughter, but had tricked Lolita and Spence as well. Very cannily he had played each one against the other and

was now gone off to laugh with his plunder.

Antrim's glance, brightly fixed, was still on the tree when Spence's voice tore from the fog behind him: "Git out of there, Curly, you goddam fool—leave me line my sights on that bastard sheriff!" And *crack* on the heels of his words came the rifle; and Antrim's whisled look saw the sheriff reel, saw his outflung arms lose their hold of the Winchester—saw him stumble and fall on his face in the bear grass. In that selfsame moment Sundance's pistol roared and Lolita's shrill scream pierced the gun-pounded bedlam, and died.

25

LUCK IS A WOMAN

THE rush of events seemed to have paralyzed Antrim; he stood hung up in the crush of his thinking and let big Sundance get clear away.

To hear a bold, handsome woman sob out her last breath—to see that hound of the law, John Slaughter, toppled, were reason in plenty to stand there rooted. But on top of this there came remembrance. He had had the hunch only yesterday, and had scoffed it away as preposterous. To find that the hunch was well founded—to hear it confirmed by Spence's own words—that here in the warm quivering flesh was the man Wyatt Earp had claimed to have killed eight years ago in the mesquite brush and greasewood of the Iron Springs water hole—in a word, that Sundance was Curly Bill Brocius come back for his plunder, was a startling enough thing to stagger anyone.

Small wonder Jake Gauze had feared him!

Sudden fear gripped Antrim, pulled him bodily out of his thinking; but too late. Curly Bill was gone. And gone were the broncs he had seen tied yonder. Hid by the swirling mists of the fog he could dimly hear the far pound of their travel. Then a nearer sound drew his eyes, spike sharp, to find Pete Spence still within his reach, a wraithlike shape trampling down the wet growth as he floundered through the clutching brush, panting, snarling, gone hoarse with his cursing of the man who had left him afoot in this waste.

"Spence!" Antrim called, and lifted his gun. It brought Spence round with his insane face all warped and twisted. There was froth on his lips; a blaze in his eyes. A snakehead of flame licked out from his middle and the whine of its bullet jerked Antrim's hatbrim. Antrim held his arm straight out and fired.

Spence dropped. With his mouth stretched wide he came to a knee and steadied his wabbling gun on a branch.

Antrim fired again, and after that Spence did not move any more.

It came to Antrim suddenly that, in Curly Bill's boots, tricked and cheated twice over, he would be on fire with desire for revenge; that he'd find Jake Gauze if it took him through hell. "An' that, by Gawd," he told himself, "is exactly where that lobo is off to!"

Off to find Jake—off to settle the score.

He remembered the horses they'd left with dropped reins in the salt cedars back by this canyon's entrance. He broke into a run.

The small of his back was wet with sweat when he came to the entrance. There were rivers of sweat streaking down his cheeks; but the horses were there. Sundance had been too much in a swivet to remember these broncs, or to waste time hunting them through this fog just to loose them when, in all probability, by his way of thinking, Pete Spence would account for Antrim.

Antrim was glad now he had taken Kerrick's claybank; that horse had more guts than you could hang on a fencepost. If any horse Jake had, could make this trek and return with-

out rest, it was Kerrick's. Curly Bill had a pair to depend on.

Antrim stripped off his spurs and threw them away. He would take no chance on temptation's urging. He knew if he had those spurs he might use them. He just couldn't afford to. If this horse played out—

He would not let himself envisage such thought.

* * *

THE LONG day crawled.

Fog was a dirty sheet wrapped round him. It was a gray woolen blanket when he circled the mesa. Juniper trees and live oak on the slope made crazy patterns in the steamy vapor. Through the ash and sycamore the going was tough; became tougher still when the claybank pulled out of it. But the horse wasn't lame; Antrim had fixed that mis-set hind shoe long before they'd been ready to leave Jake's ranch.

A pang of remorse briefly touched him presently when he recalled with what haste he'd come tearing off with never a look at the girl or Slaughter. Not that a look would have helped them much. The girl had known what chance she ran. As for Slaughter—dying was one of those things he got paid for.

The Cherrycow Mountains glimmered blue in the west.

In a way it was lucky, what had happened to Slaughter. Antrim couldn't help feeling so. He wouldn't have willed it, or had any hand in it; but Slaughter, alive, would have taken him in. He might not have got out of that jail this time.

Well, the treasure he'd come here seeking was gone. Jake had beat them all out of it. Some way it didn't seem to make much difference. He had spent a lot of time tracking down that plunder and he reckoned he had ought to be feeling like Sundance; but he couldn't seem to get up no sweat about it. Another goal had taken its place, and thinking about Idy Red that way brought his mind squarely back to Sundance.

The man would be in a fine sweat of hate by the time he sighted Jake's buildings. If Sundance caught him he would carve Jake's heart out. But if, instead of Jake, Sundance found Idy Red there...

It was this drear thought that was cording the muscles on Antrim's jaw —that had caused him to throw his spurs away lest desire for speed should prove his utter undoing. He must nurse this horse, keep it going and able. Time and again he had strained his eyes on the forward distance, but never once had his stare found Sundance.

It was dusk when he reached Jake's ranch.

He groaned when he saw it. He had come too late. Sundance had come and wreaked his vengeance. A dark huddle lay sprawled on the ranch house porch; he need go no nearer to know it was Jake. He could see the man's face, upturned, ugly twisted, gone warped with his horror.

Antrim stepped round the body. He peered in through the door, at once fearful of what ghastly sight he might see, yet knowing there could be no peace for him ever—

It was then he heard the creak and jingle that comes from the paraphernalia of horses. And there they came, the two stolen Arabs. Through the long, purple shadows of approaching night they came into the yard from behind the stable. Sundance, leading on the chestnut stud, had his head turned, airing his wit, and laughing in his cool, suave fashion at the girl who was tied, hand and foot, on the filly.

Sweat stung Antrim's face like needles. He moved from the porch, stepping over Jake's body. "Sundance."

He could see the shoulders of the burly man stiffen. Sundance knew that voice and he knew what it meant. And there he was, coming round in the saddle with both guns lifting, both guns gouting flame. But his fire was hurried; he was on a horse that had gone straight up with that first report. Antrim fired just once. Sundance's shape came out of the saddle. On the ground it looked no different than Jake's.

IDY RED said coolly: "Kinda reckoned you'd be showin' up round here; kinda reckoned you'd

figger it out, give you time. I been waitin' fo' you. I was waitin' fo' you when Sundance come. We was on the porch— I had a gun on Jake, an' had just got done layin' the law down to him. I knowed Jake would be comin' back quick's he got shut of the rest o' you. He wasn't scared of you gettin' that treasure. He knowed I'd gone an' shifted them markers—" Antrim looked incredulous.

Idy Red said, "I sure did—me an' my horse. He's a pow'ful strong critter an' we took plenty of time to it. Had 'em long moved 'fore you ever come round here."

She brushed the hair back out of her eyes and gave him her slow, wholly pleasant smile. "Jake was wantin' that plunder so bad he could taste it. I knowed that—I ain't kep' his house all this while for nothin'. Hell, I been brung up on that treasure!—yarns of the vanished yesterdays—windies of the things that wild bunch done. To hear Jake tell it he was a real hell-tearer. Mebbe he was—I dunno; but I've allus figgered like a heap of that treasure was owin' to me—it was my ol' man helped 'em bury that plunder. Yes, sir! Red Dan Harris! They've allus claimed he was kilt by the Injuns, but I know better—it was Zwing Hunt killed him.

"I heard Sundance come into the yard—heard his hoss, I mean. But I never paid no mind. I figgered it was you an' I had all I c'ld do to keep Jake quiet; he was pow'ful anxious to git away. Then, first thing I knowed, there was Jake keelin' over an' the place all fumed up with gun smell an' racket. I reckon you can piece out the rest."

Antrim nodded. "But I thought you was sweet on Sundance?"

"That skunk! Not after I seen him kill Bat Kerrick!—the honey-tongued sidewinder! I sure been fooled about *him* all right."

A breeze seemed to stir the cottonwoods yonder.

"Well...I expect you'll be pullin' on out of yere now...tearin' off t' new pastures...." She shook back her rebellious red curls again; poked a dried horse chip around with her toe. "Don't guess you'd be findin' nothin' yere to hold you...?"

Antrim took off his hat and looked at it dubiously. It seemed to have been his fortune ever to say the wrong thing to this girl. He looked at her, his eyes narrowing a little as though this were a thing demanding all his courage. "Them horses," he said—"them A-rabs. I reckon it was you moved them out of that cove; guess you was figurin' to use 'em, mebbe. I been thinkin' 'twould be a good idea 'f we was to take 'em back to their owner. He lives down below the Line a piece at a place called Torreon. We could ride 'em down there an' turn 'em over. That way you could see Eagle Pass. We could come back past it—could even stay there, mebbe, if you think you could stand double harness with me—"

"I ain't got no folks to give you no dowry—"

"I ain't honin' to marry no dowry."

"What'll I do with all that plunder then? Won't nobody else ever find it, now I've moved them markers—"

"Leave it there," Antrim said.

"A mighty good idea." John Slaughter moved out of the trees and came toward them. He had bandaged himself with strips torn from his shirt tail. "I've been listening to you and I'm glad to find I had this guaged correctly. Though it ain't, rightly speaking, one of the things I get paid for, I guess," Slaughter said, and his eyes kind of twinkled, "I'll just bid you goodbye here an' wish you luck."

"Luck," Antrim said, "is a woman."

THE END

HOOFPRINTS to the HANGTREE

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

(author of "These Guns Have A Curse On Them")

You couldn't tell from looking at Gideon Lilly about what was going on underneath his skin. And what he knew about horses was more than showed on the surface, either — as the fugitive longrider found out!

THE TRAIL up from Texas into the Territory was a little more traveled these days, and so it was no surprise to Gideon Lilly to see the horseman coming across the prairie toward his camp. He had stopped the night before at this crossing on Deer Creek at the foot of the first rise to the Kiamish Mountains, wanting to give his team a rest before they hit the rocky climb over the ridge; now, at sunrise, he was ready to travel.

Lilly, who was harnessing his team to the wagon, called out to his nephew, who was frying bacon which Lilly had smoked for himself, not having much respect for the meat sold in stores. "Slice up some more meat, Alvy; we might have company."

By the time Lilly had the team hitched up, breakfast was ready and the rider pulled up to the camp on a lathered buckskin horse who was favoring his right front foot. "Morning," Lilly said gravely. "Have a bite with us?"

Gideon Lilly was a reserved man, sparing with words; but he showed an unvarying courtesy toward everybody, which hid almost as unvarying a contempt which he held for a large part of those with whom he came into contact. He was a short, blocky man with a chest and shoulders so broad and thick as to threaten to burst the gray wool shirt he wore. He had a black derby hat set square above his black brows. His head and face were square, and his eyes were like blue steel, observing everything around him and revealing nothing. Now, as the stranger dismounted, Lilly's eyes were veiling inordinate rage at a man who would abuse a horse as this man had clearly been doing.

"Don't mind if I do," the rider answered, dropping his reins.

Gideon Lilly's eyes seemed to be looking at nothing in particular; but he had noted the lean taciturnity of the rider, the hawklike features and shifty gaze as the man searched the camp and surroundings suspiciously, and Lilly formed an instant dislike for the man. Despite his immobile features and his even voice, Lilly had a temperament which could be set boiling instantly; there was much inside him that people didn't see.

Alva, the tall young nephew, set out tin plates and cups; he poured the coffee, took up the meat and got the browned biscuits out of the Dutch oven. "Sit and eat," he invited.

The stranger said, "Just open up them biscuits, put the meat in 'em, and I'll take 'em along. I'm in a hurry."

LILLY HARDLY glanced at the man, but he noticed the pre-emptory sound in the voice that told him his was not an ignorant man's rude way of making a request; it was an order. Lilly eased over toward the wagon.

But the man was faster—he got between Lilly and the wagon box, and brought his gun out at the same time. "No, you don't; just step back and do

as I say. Tell the boy to fix the sandwiches; and you pour me some o' that coffee."

"Is the posse far behind you?" Lilly asked quietly.

"Far enough," the man said after eyeing him sharply a moment. "Boy, move, like I tell you."

"Fix his sandwiches, Alvy," Lilly said in his usual calm voice. "He won't get very far; his horse has thrown a shoe."

This lean and shifty-eyed individual slopped up the coffee loudly from the tin cup Alva handed him, wiped his sandy mustache on his shirt sleeve, and offered an unhumourous grin.

"This is the end of his run," he said. "Here's where I change horses. Mister, just take that near bay out of harness and put my saddle on him."

Lilly said, "He won't ride."

"Then the other one."

"He won't ride, either."

The man's face had an ironic twist. "Couldn't keep from sayin' that, could you? I just happened to see you ridin' one and leadin' the other when you brought 'em up from grazin'. Man can see a long ways across the prairie in this clear air."

Lilly shrugged his thick shoulders. "Suit yourself."

He unhitched the horse, while the lean man climbed up on the wagon seat and kept him covered with his pistol, eating a fried bacon sandwich with the other hand. He turned back and threw the covering tarpaulin off the wagon bed and looked at its contents, saw a couple of kegs of horseshoes; a kit box of blacksmith's tools; clothing boxes; a rifle; food boxes; quilts and an assortment of pieces of harness and leather. Near the tailgate there were a couple of rich handmade saddles.

"Blacksmith, huh?" he asked.

"Blacksmith and horse trainer," Gideon Lilly said with a touch of pride.

"And your horses won't ride! Just taking these saddles along for trading purposes, I reckon."

★ ★ ★

The horse threw the outlaw.

Lilly went over and caught the fugitive's horse, spoke a few gentle words to the nervous animal and quieted him almost instantly. He lifted the front foot and examined it. The horse's shoe had been cast off, and the frog of the foot was bruised from his barefooted run over the graveled terrain.

He unbuckled the cinch and lifted the saddle off, noting the gunny sack tied behind the cantle. The sack showed an outline of its contents, and Lilly spoke to the man, as he brought the saddle and threw it on the near animal of his bay team. "That's the pouch the government sends its Indian payments into the office at Kiowain, isn't it?"

The man twisted his face in surprise, then grinned. "You can't never tell without lookin', and it wouldn't pay you to open that gunny sack and look."

Lilly cinched up the saddle on his horse without protest from the animal, and as he worked, he said speculatively. "Then you robbed the stage, probably at Pecan Creek Crossing; that would be the best place. The stage reaches the creek at about four o'clock." He squinted at the sun. "It's right at six now. Allowing half an hour for the word to get to Kiowa, and half an hour to get up a posse—"

"That gives me an hour lead," the fugitive grinned. "And that's enough, old man; I'll be in them hills there by that time, and a pack of bloodhounds couldn't find me then. Now, step back, and thanks for the grub and the horse."

GIDEON LILLY'S face was without expression as he stepped up about ten feet clear of the horse's head and watched the man mount the sleek bay animal. The man sat the horse, checked the tiestring holding his bag of loot, then gave Lilly a grin. "So he won't ride? Any horse another man can ride, I can ride, friend."

Lilly made a sligh motion with his hand, unnoticed by the rider, and the horse exploded with the sudden fury of a stick of dynamite. The animal's hind feet left the ground with such an unexpected suddenness that the bandit sailed over the horse's head in a complete somersault, landing in a sitting position on the ground.

Lilly had been prepared to spring on the man, but the bandit had not suffered more than a jolt, and he had his gun out instantly.

"Hold it," he snapped. Lilly shrugged and remained still. The man got to his feet, cursing the horse. Lilly said nothing; his nephew squatted by the breakfast fire, elbows on knees, and a smile hidden by the tin coffee cup at his face.

"Take that saddle off and put it on the other one," the man said. "I know damned well one of these horses rides —I seen you on him."

In five minutes Lilly had the saddle changed to his other horse, and the man mounted. "Now," he said. "Let's see this crowbait throw me."

It seemed as though the horse had heard this unjust remark and had taken umbrage, for he dropped his head between his legs and lifted his hind quarters toward the sky. The bandit was ready for him this time, however, and clung to the saddle. "No, you don't," he growled. "Now get going." He spurred the animal viciously and jerked his head up with his Spanish-bit bridle.

The horse's head kept coming up and his body with it until the animal was standing upright on his hind feet, barely missing toppling over backward. But the bandit was thoroughly alert now, and he batted the animal down with his hat.

Then came the battle. The horse sunfished and spun on his hind feet, jumped straight up and landed stiff-legged, ran a few steps and stopped suddenly with his head down—never gave the bandit a moment to recover his balance. The horse stopped dead in his tracks a moment, and the bandit slashed him with his spurs.

The horse folded his knees and lay down, started to roll over. The bandit came out of his saddle just in time to avoid being crushed, and stood beside the horse cursing the animal's ancestry to the beginning of time.

The horse lay quiet, refusing to get up.

The bandit kicked him and turned away from him with a raging disgust,

and cursed Lilly alone, then each horse seperately, and then the three of them as a group.

WHEN HE had finished, Lilly asked, "Do you still think you can ride my horses, or do you want your saddle put back on your own?"

The man was puzzled now, and time was slipping by. Then an idea came to him. "Hell," he said, "Why didn't I think about it before? You're a blacksmith, and you've got tools and shoes right there in your wagon. Put a new shoe on my own horse's front foot."

"He's a little lame," Lilly pointed out; "it's cruel to work a horse in that condition."

"Put a shoe on that bare foot and he won't be lame long—at least not enough to hurt till I get where I'm going."

"Where is that?"

"There," the man grinned, pointing to the rough points of the mountains a few miles ahead. "Give me a few minutes start up in them rocks and ridges and the whole Confederate Army couldn't find me."

The bandit following and hovering behind him with a drawn pistol in his back, Gideon Lilly set about shoeing the bandit's horse. First he transferred the bandit's saddle back to his own horse, then took the man's lariat, lifted the horses's foot and with a sling made of the rope, tied the horse's foot up off the ground, hanging from a loop over the saddle horn.

Then he got his kit box and a Number Four shoe and took them to the horse. He took his knife from the box and pared off some of the shell of the hoof on the inside edge of the foot, cleaned out around the tender frog, and then nailed the shoe in place. It took him only a few minutes, and when he let the horse's leg down, the animal for the first time, rested its share of his weight on that hoof.

The bandit had watched him carefully, and was satisfied that Lilly had not tried any tricks on him. Then he got to his horse, still covering the blacksmith with his gun, and gave his orders. "You and the kid walk along in front of me for a piece. I don't want you to try any target practice on me with that rifle you was goin' for in your wagon when I stopped you."

Lilly's face did not reveal any of the rage within him. He was not a man who liked to walk far on a hot morning. But he said in his normally quiet voice, "Come on, Alvy. We'll go with the man a piece."

They walked in front of the horseback bandit for almost a mile, up the rutted trail climbing toward the broken peaks of the Kiamichis. Then the man spoke again. "All right," he said. "I reckon you can't get back to your wagon in time to do you any good with that Winchester. Thanks, blacksmith. Just charge your work to me; maybe I'll pay you some day when I see you again."

"Yes, maybe you will," Gideon Lilly answered quietly. "Maybe you will."

* * *

THE BANDIT spurred his horse toward the mountains, and Lilly and Alva stood and watched him a moment. Then Lilly turned around, put his two hands to his mouth and emitted a piercingly shrill whistle.

Both his bay horses, nibbling grass around his wagon, raised their heads and listened. He whistled again, and both animals broke into a trot which they continued until they had reached him. He took a couple of blocks of lump sugar out of his pants pocket and rubbed one into the mouth of each horse, and patted his nose. Then he and Alva mounted the animals, barebacked and without halters, and rode them back to camp.

The slender youth was grinning broadly. "I've wondered, Uncle Gideon, what use it was training horses to buck a man off just for show. Good advertisin' for a horse tamer, I reckon, but I never allowed to see it of any practical use."

"Alvy," his uncle said gravely, "a horse is a knowin' animal. He's got sense we don't realize he's got. I reckon it might come through smell or something—like a dog can smell the difference between a man that's afraid of him, and one that ain't—but anyhow these horses knew I didn't like that man; when I signaled them to buck him off, they both done a right

smart job of it. A proper trained horse is a mighty handy animal."

"Looks like you might have took a chance grabbing for his gun some time or other," the boy said. "I've seen you take a man's gun away from him. You're plenty strong."

"Alvy, you've got to know men as well as horses to get along in this country. The men I took guns from were more scared of the guns than I was; they were men that were nervous and bluffing. This one wasn't nervous and he wasn't bluffing; he'd have shot on the first suspicious move after he got what he wanted. It ain't courageous to get yourself killed—when you can get the same result a safer way."

"I know you're sore at him for abusing that horse, but are you sure you'll get him?"

"A man can only hope he's doin' right," Lilly said with a matter of fact voice; he was never a man to make a prophesy.

And Alva, who was apprenticed to him to learn the trade, had seen enough of his late father's brother to believe what he said. He knew that the sight of a man abusing a horse started a silent rage boiling in his tight-lipped old uncle.

* * *

THEY REACHED the camp, and Alva said, "You want me to put the horses back to the wagon?"

"Not now Alvy. We'll eat while we're waitin' for the posse. We'll go along with them."

"But they might not catch him up in them mountains." Alva answered. "After all, those hills are as thick with untook outlaws as a dog's back is thick with fleas."

"We'll go along," the old man said quietly, "and we'll see."

They finished breakfast, and as they saw the posse coming several miles across the prairie, Lilly went to his wagon. "Saddle 'em up, Alvy," he said.

While Alvy saddled two horses, Gideon picked out a horseshoe, a few nails and a hammer and some tools and put them into a bag that he tied to his saddle, and then got his rifle. By that time the posse rode up to their camp in a swirl of dust.

The leader of the posse was Rawley, the storekeeper in Kiowa, and he recognized the blacksmith. "Howdy, Gideon," he said. "See anything of a long, lean polecat on a buckskin that was in somewhat of a hurry?"

"The man that robbed the stage at Pecan Creek?" Lilly asked.

"Yeah. How'd you learn about it so soon?"

"He had breakfast with me, and I done a little work for him. Me and Alvy will ride along with you if you like."

"We could use you," Rawley said. "That hombre is mad-dog mean. Killed one of the passengers in the stage when the man tried to help the driver. I'd hate to see him get clean away."

"We may be able to find him," Lilly said with his usual caution.

The blacksmith and Alva mounted, and the whole posse set out for the mountains, Lilly riding beside Rawley, the leader. Rawley knew the blacksmith's addiction to careful understatement, and suspected that he had reason for saying as much as he did. "You think we'll find him," he said. "How come?"

"Oh, I dont know. Maybe his horse will balk on him."

"You mean you know the horse he's on?"

"No, never saw him before the man rode up to camp; couldn't say for sure what he'd do, but we can see."

And Rawley, knowing the old man, knew that he was not going to get any more out of him.

* * *

The posse made its way to the foot of the mountains, where the steep sides had poured sandstone and granite rocks rubble across the lip of the prairie. Here, they followed the trail upward. Runoff water, having followed the ruts, had washed the topsoil and clay off the road, leaving it paved with the upright edges of rock layers and loose, rough stones.

"Not easy going," Rawley observed, as his own already-tired animal began to show the effects of the steep climb over the rocks and rubble. "Nobody

could get very far around here on a tired horse."

"Man wouldn't have to go very far around here," Lilly pointed out. "He could hide almost anywhere in this kind of stuff."

The mountainside was covered with post oak and scrub; brush sprouted on every patch of topsoil, and grapevines made hanging green curtains concealing all the rocky forest except the open and twisted trail immediately ahead. Gideon Lilly was getting occasional glimpses of the tracks of the bandit's horse whenever they crossed one of the few spots of earth on the rocky trail. Now he stopped his animal and turned to Rawley. "I think it won't be long now," he said. "It might be better if everybody had their guns ready, and kept their eyes open. Might see that buckskin standin' somewhere in the middle of the trail, and if we do, every man had better hit the dirt and take cover. Your man will be somewhere around close."

Rawley passed the word, and divided the men off half and half, one group to scatter through the brush to the left and the other to the right in case they saw the horse. Then they went on, unable to keep any silence, since it was impossible to avoid the clatter of the shod hooves of their animals on the rocky trail.

THEY found the bandit's horse with unexpected suddenness. They had just rounded a big boulder on the steep trail and saw the horse standing hipshot before them. Rawley threw up his hand in a signal to stop.

But the men had hardly begun to slide off the horses when the mountainside burst with the explosion of a pistol. The bullet knocked Lilly's derby off his head, and it rolled over to the gully alongside the path. The horses reared and whinnied as the men dropped to the ground. There could be no secrecy.

The second shot came just as Rawley hit the ground running. The men ducked for cover to the right and left of the trail and melted into the greenery, leaving the horses cavorting wildly in the open.

Then began the threshing through the woods, Lilly along with Rawley, the grizzled gray hair standing stiffly upright on his bare head, his square face red and set in hard lines, his lips thin and tight. Mr. Lilly said not a word as he pushed his way through the brush, his rifle before him.

They worked through the entanglement alongside the road to a point where there was less underbrush and more openness. Lilly crossed the clearing with a determined pace, ignoring the possibility of a snipe shot getting him. Rawley saw this, shook his head at the old blacksmith's lack of trepidation, and followed him.

Rawley got it. The bandit's rifle barked once again from a point behind the top of a barn-sized boulder overlooking the trail, and Rawley went down with a bullet in the flesh of his leg. He kept rolling toward cover.

Lilly backed up to a tree and began adjusting the rear sight of his rifle for elevation, while bullets rained around him, acting with the same slow indifferent deliberation with which he would have measured a horse's hoof for a shoe. Then he placed his rifle against the tree.

"Come down from there, man," he said, and even now his voice was not raised above that of a simple statement.

The bandit did not answer, but sent a bullet pinging into Lilly's tree.

Lilly said, "I see you. Come down or I'll shoot."

One of the other possemen had come up behind Lilly, and he looked at the rock. "I don't see him," he said.

Lilly turned and looked at him silently, and did not answer. The man got the impression that the blacksmith was thinking that he hadn't expected anybody else to be able to see what he saw.

Gideon Lilly took a careful sight along the barrel of his Winchester, then spoke for the last time. "You coming?"

The man answered with another into Lilly's tree.

Then Lilly pulled his trigger. His bullet coursed upward toward the giant boulder, passed through a crack only two inches wide, and entered the

body of the bandit. The blacksmith had only been able to see a faint patch of the bandit's faded blue shirt, but that had been enough for him.

The bandit suddenly popped upward as though he had been flung out of his hiding place. He lost his footing and slid the fifteen feet down to the foot of the stone, his pistol clattering away out of his reach.

GIDEON Lilly stepped out from his tree and walked over to the man who lay moaning in the dried oak leaves at the foot of the boulder. He picked up the man's gun and thrust it into his own belt.

Then he stretched the man out and began going through his pockets, finding the man's wallet and opening it. Two other possemen had come up out of the woods now, and they watched him with curiosity. Lilly counted out six silver dollars from the bandit's purse, and returned the rest of his money to the snap-opening purse and handed it to one of the possemen.

"He owed me a dollar for shoeing his horse, and five dollars for ruining my hat," Lilly said soberly. "I'm taking it."

He walked over to where old Benny Jackson was taking care of Rawley. Benny was something of a veterinarian and was pretty handy with a bandage around a gunshot wound.

"He hurt bad?" the blacksmith asked.

"No, just a slight flesh wound," Jackson answered. "He can ride back without any trouble. How's that bandit; you kill him?"

"No, I just broke his collar bone. I didn't want to kill him."

"That's too bad," Benny Jackson said in disappointment. "It would have saved the wear and tear on a good rope."

Rawley, now sitting with his back to a postoak, said, "Thanks for knocking him off for us, Gideon. He could have killed a lot of us before we smoked him out. I didn't know you were such a marksman. Pick out a good tree limb strong enough to hang him to, will you?"

"No," Lilly answered shortly. "I don't care much for mob violence."

Rawley and the men around him looked their surprise at the always-unpredictable blacksmith.

"Then what did you come along for?"

"He owed me money," Lilly answered simply; "I don't like people to try to beat me out of my labor."

He turned to his nephew and said, "Come on, Alvy. We'll be going." Then he pushed his way through the crowd and made his way back down to his horse, Alva following him. He picked up his derby, examined the two bullet holes in it, then clamped it tightly on his head.

WHEN they reached the bandit's horse, Alva caught up his reins and tried to lead him. The horse wouldn't move. The gunny-sack containing the money pouch was still tied to the cantle, but Lilly gave it no attention.

"He did balk," Alva said in surprise. "How'd you know he'd do that?"

"When you get to know horses, Alvy, you can just about predict what they'll do under different circumstances."

Lilly untied the sack of tools on his saddle, and removed from the bandit's horse the shoe he had put on earlier this morning. He made crescents of leather the size of half the shoe, inserted them between the shoe and the foot on the inside edge of the shell of the hoof and nailed the new shoe on. "Now try him," he said as he let the horse's foot down.

The horse tried his stance gingerly, then stepped out and allowed himself to be led.

Lilly said, "That's all, Alvy. The horse will be comfortable now. Let the posse do what they want with him. He ain't ours."

They got on their own horses and rode some distance in silence while Alva wrestled with his problem, then he finally had to ask. "How'd you know he would balk?"

"I didn't know for sure, but I knew he couldn't go far. How far could you run up a rocky hillside if you was wearing a boot with a heel that was run

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THE REAL WEST

INDIANS ARE INTERESTING PEOPLE

by W. J. RICE

If you lived near the Indians you would soon discover that they are not only interesting but are by nature, inclined to be good fellows. Columbus had no trouble with them, nor did the French who settled up eastern Canada, they even intermarried. It was later, when they saw that their land was all going to be taken and ploughed up, that they turned warlike and against the Whites.

There is an old belief that it is second nature for an indian to steal. This is wrong. Some of them got that way after a time—that is all. And you can't bribe one of them on a bet, nor beat him down on a price. Given authority most Indians made splendid police officers. Incidentally, it was the Indian Police that killed Sitting-Bull in 1891 when he resisted arrest, after having stirred up an uprising among the tribe.

Following are some anecdotes.

During the early fifties, Francis Parkman (author of "California and Oregon Trails") was hunting in Wyoming. Suddenly, upon rounding a hill he found himself face to face with an Indian Chieftain. Startled, yet realizing the amount of admiration an Indian has for courage, he spoke a pleasant "Howdy". Indians are not emotional and his reply did not indicate friendliness or otherwise. The Indian then asked "Where you going?" In Indian words he replied, "Bear hunting." Scrutinizing the rifle, the Chieftain now pressed "Let me see gun". Now the hunter was puzzled; he feared he was being tricked out of his only weapon, feared too that other Indians were near, since they did not usually go about singly. Again the Chieftain asked. Still the hunter hesitated.

Then suddenly it dawned upon him that this might be a test of faith. He still pretended not to understand, so that the Chieftain might not suspect his unwillingness to give up the rifle. In Indian he asked, "What is it you want?" When the Indian again repeated his request, the hunter smiled, "Oh sure," and handed over the gun. It was a tense moment. The Indian looked the gun over, first one side and then the other, as if much interested. Then he grinned slightly, handed the gun back and concluded, "White man Indian friend." The hunter nodded. Then he asked, "Let me see your gun?" After carefully looking over he handed it to the Cheiftain, saying, "Indian White man friend." "Ugh", the Indian grinned. And now they parted. Never after that did the hunter hesitate to roam about in the locality. In case of capture by Indians, the captive is usually taken before a chief. Had the hunter refused, as most of us would have been inclined to do, the story might have had an entirely different ending.

Sometime in the early nineties a Dakota stockman, returning with a load of provisions, had been shot from ambush. Tracks of a large man were found behind a large boulder near the trail. In a gully were found evidence of a horse having stood for some time. These tracks led onto a piece of firm stony ground. Following it was impossible. "Here's where we need a bloodhound," said one of the party. "That gives me an idea," said another. "Know old Charlie—one time Indian Police?" "Yes". "They say he can track like a hound. Sounds sort of fishy. Might be

worth trying." "We'll get him," said another.

Sioux Reservation was forty miles. A rider was sent there. Next afternoon the Indian was shown the tracks. Closely scrutinizing the ground where the horse had stood, he picked up something off the ground. Now displaying it in the palm of his hand, he asked, "What color that horse?"

"Oh! By gosh, he's found some horse hairs," said one. Twas spring and shedding time, yet none of the whites had thought of it. "Why, it's a light sorrel," said one.

Said the Indian, "Big man, big horse, round foot all same dollar." He was right on this too. Few horses have round feet. This one did have noticeably round feet.

Now reaching the hard and more or less stoney ground, the Indian halted. He looked provoked. "White man damn smart", he grumbled. Grave doubts were now entertained by the party as to whether Charlie would be able to accomplish much more. But what a surprise. Observing the ground a bit, he started slowly off, saying, "Me think, maybe ketchum". Here and there he picked up a small stone and examined it. At length some one asked, "What s leading you?" "What?" he voiced. "What's leading you? What do you see? We don't see anything."

"Oh, you not know? I show." Then he picked up a couple of pebbles not much larger than a thimble. "Look", he voiced. "One side clean, one side dirty. Clean side, top side. Rain make that." He fitted them back into their respective holes. They had beeen overturned by hoofs. Here and there he pointed out the same condition. There could be no mistake. "Look loose stone, that all. Damn slow sometime." Three days later they had their man. A small stock owner, a neighbor of the man he had killed. He was in love with the latter's young wife. Lynching followed.

U. S. Marshal, Ransom Payne, was once following the Dalton gang in the rough hilly section of Northeastern Oklahoma. With him were two deputies, a cowboy and an intelligent Indian guide. Twas scorching hot, and the horses were sweating and foaming. They had reached a low swail full of brush and dwarf willows. The Indian, who was riding a few rods ahead, suddenly stopped, and turning around in his saddle, he held up his right hand. They halted. "What is it, Jim?" asked the Marshal. He didn't reply, but got off his horse and went forward quickly for about twenty five feet. Here he sniffed the air a few moments. Then he walked to where the men had halted and said, "I smell horses." "So do I". said one of the deputies. "It's our own, ain't it?" "I thought the same," said the Indian. "I've changed my mind. Those fellows are not far ahead of us. I'm going up ahead on foot." Taking a rifle, he soon disappeared. In half an hour he returned. "By gosh, they're *there*. They're around that turn on the left. Behind a big bunch of boulders. Couldn't see a man—just the heads of their horses." Payne turned to his men and declared seriously, "Boys, right there was our fate. We'd have been shot down like rabbits." It was decided to get up above them and it took an hour to do this. When they got there, all that remained was a badly maimed horse, and a heavy box of ammunition. A day or so later, the chase was abandoned. When Payne returned, he informed, "Well, we didn't get 'em but we're lucky to be alive."

An English sportsman, who often came to Canada, met an old Indian and his wife. They lived in a log hut near Lake Superior. One autumn and just before returning aboard, he lost a wallet containing 385 in gold coins. A search resulted futilely. Two years later, the Englishman returned. He brought the Indian a steel fishing rod, a pipe, and tobacco. He dined with the Indian couple. After dinner they sat down on a log to smoke. Presently, the Indian went inside. Returning, he handed the gentleman his wallet. "Why Peter! Where in the name of heaven did you find this?" "I find where we chase wounded wild-cat in brush." "When?" "Oh—maybe one month after you go." "Well, I sure never expected to see this again." Then dumping the contents into the palm of his hand, he pondered, "How much did

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"It was self-defense, Doc; Warner drew first."

THE SINGLE TRAIL

by LEE FLOREN
(author of "Range of Forgotten Law")

They were both proud, both stubborn, Bill Warner and Mike Rockwell, and Doc Frayne knew that their trails would come together in gunsmoke. Unless he could find another way . . .

MORNING SUNSHINE danced through the clean window, showing Doc Frayne dozing in his chair, head down as he snored softly. Those stubby short fingers, resting on the wide arms, had been busy the night before, and a new baby had been added to a nester's family.

Then the gunfire came, smashing and hard, pushing aside the stillness of Cinch Ring town, and bringing up the doctor's head. He listened, still a little asleep, and he heard men and women coming out on the street.

A man went by the open door, almost running. Frayne called, "Jim."

Boots stopped, and a long head looked in. "Down at the saloon, Doc. Must've been a gunfight."

The head pulled back, and Frayne heard boots leave; he got to his feet, still sleepy, and got his bag.

Wade Harris stood talking with Marshal Hendricks. Harris still held his pistol, muzzle down. He looked at Frayne. "Gent inside needs you, doc."

Harris looked back at Marshal Hendricks. He explained something, talking in a low voice, and townspeople stood around, listening.

A group of people were gathered around a pool-table and Frayne got through them, using his elbows. Somebody said, "Make way for Doc

Frayne." and the men moved aside, and he saw a young fellow on the pool-table.

Somebody had put a tarp under him to keep blood from the green cloth. Bill Warner said, "Howdy, Doc," and his voice was not too strong.

Frayne put his bag on the table. "What happened?" "Wade Harris an' me; we had a little trouble."

He guessed, from the sag of the right shoulder, that it was broken. His fingers showed this. He let the shirt fall back.

A man said, "Hope blood doesn't soak through onto that table. I freighted it in and it's a job to recover one."

"Good Gawd," another man said.

Frayne said, "He can be moved, Williams; I don't reckon blood has seeped through yet. There's a stretcher in my office. Somebody go get it?"

"I'll get it, doc."

Williams repeated. "Get him off there before blood soaks in; I don't want that cloth ruined."

Frayne looked at the pot-bellied owner of the saloon, and he did not attempt to veil the disgust in his brown eyes. "That pool table means more to Williams than a man's life," an onlooker stated.

Williams turned red. Frayne smiled a little. "Maybe if it was a Double Bar man on it—or Harris or Rockwell—Williams might not worry so much. He knows who butters his bread, he does."

Williams spoke stiffly. "Mike Rockwell's Double Bar iron built this town, Doc Frayne. These farmers didn't."

Bill Warner opened his eyes. "I'm not a farmer, you damn' rum-seller; I'm a cowman."

"You run with the farmers," Williams said.

DOC FRAYNE put his hand against the saloon-man's face. He said almost wearily, "Get out of here," and pushed, but his push was hard; Williams went back and almost fell down.

"Doc, if you weren't so dammed old!"

"I'm only fifty two."

A man said roughly, "Keep your mouth shut, Williams."

Marshal Hendricks and Wade Harris had come into the saloon. They stood on the outside and watched. Frayne looked at Harris and the Double Bar man said, "We played poker. He accused me of shady dealing. It was open not afraid of the wound; I'm afraid of Bridges looked back at the medico. "How bad off is Bill?"

Frayne said, "He's got a broken shoulder. I'm keeping him in bed. I'm and shut, and these farmers around here, although they don't cotton to me, will have to admit that. Ain't that right, men?"

No answer.

Doc Frayne said, "An old story, Harris."

The stretcher came and they took young Warner to Frayne's office, putting him on the cot in the back. By this time Mrs. Jones, the nurse, had arrived, and she and Frayne undressed the youth. They were alone in the sunlit room.

"Has anybody gone to notify Mrs. Warner, doctor?"

"Joe Smith rode out, Mrs. Jones."

The woman was about twenty and her hair was brown, but her once-slim form was broken in contour, for she was heavy with child.

Frayne said, "Now just take it easy, Mary. There's nothing to worry about."

"Where is Bill?"

"Back here," Warner called.

Mrs. Jones sat beside the bed and Mary Warner nodded to the nurse. Doc Frayne went outside to the buckboard where a thin, sandy-looking man held the reins on the two matched sorrels. He was Matt Bridges, Warner's only hand.

"How is he, Doc?"

Frayne said, "He'll live," and looked sharply up at Matt Bridges. "Where will you sit in this, Matt?"

"Not where I'd like to, Doc."

"What do you mean by that?"

Bridges' shoulders rose, dropped. "Mary made me promise I wouldn't go against either Harris or Rockwell; I had to promise her."

Doc Frayne was not looking at Bridges. He was looking at Harris and the tall man who stood beside him. Matt saw his gaze and turned his head

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HOOFPRINTS TO THE HANGTREE

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over toward the inside so far that to stand on it would be almost like trying to walk on the edge of your foot?"

"I see," Alvy answered. "It would put a strain on the tendon in your leg, just like a person used to high heels trying to walk barefooted, only the strain would be sideways."

"Same idea," his uncle answered. "I trimmed off enough of the shell of that horse's hoof on one side, so that when I nailed the shoe on, his foot wouldn't set level on the ground. That put the strain on his tendon, and it didn't take long for it to tire him so much that he couldn't make much progress. The rest, you can figger it if you know men and horses. That bandit would whip the animal, and the animal would stumble a few times; when he kept whipping him, the horse would give up trying, and finally balk, and no amount of whipping could make him go. Then the bandit would be afoot, and he'd wait to kill a posseman and steal his horse. It happened to work out like I figgered. It's a good thing to remember, Alvy, if you want to be a good workman."

That was more than Gideon Lilly had said at one time in three-months.

They rode on in silence, Alva despairing that he ever would get to know all there was hidden in the head underneath that square-set derby hat.

THE END

INDIANS ARE INTERESTING PEOPLE

(Continued From Page 86)

I have in this?" He counted it. 385, and then it dawned on him that this was the amount. He looked surprised. "Why Peter! And you spent none?" He shook his head, "not mine". "What?" "Not mine". "Well, it will mighty well be yours now". He quickly put the coins into the sack and threw it into the old fellow's lap. "Why, I never expected to see that again". It was with reluctance that the Indian accepted it.

Sometime that afternoon the gentleman visited a small store. He was telling the store keeper about it. "Why

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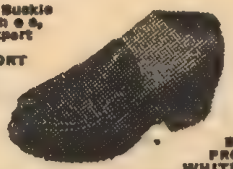

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(Continued From Page 88)

and said, "Wade Harris and his boss, Mike Rockwell."

Frayne was hoping the two men would cross the street to them. They didn't, and he was glad; the two Double Bar men went into the saloon. Bridges looked back at the medico. "How bad off is Bill?"

Frayne said. "He's got a broken shoulder. I'm keeping him in bed. I'm not afraid of the wound; I'm afraid of Bill's thoughts."

"He'll want to get at Harris and Rockwell."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Frayne went back into his office. He glanced out the clean, sparkling window and watched Matt Bridges for a moment; the cowboy was stiff with anger and with pride. But he would follow Mary Warner's orders.

Frayne thought, Mrs. Jones sure polished that window, then realized that thought was of no importance. He went into the room. Mary sat beside the bed, holding her husband's hand, touching it now and then with reassuring pats. Mrs. Jones had sat down again.

Frayne said, "When he gets more settled, we have to move him to the hotel, where Mrs. Jones will nurse him. I don't want you to get excited about this, for you have quite a chore ahead for you. Try to keep calm, please."

"I'll try. . .Doc."

"The biggest thing you can do is to hold Matt Bridges back. He has a temper and a pride but his word is his bond. I'll give you that chore. Now stay with Bill but a few moments and then go out to your buggy and go out to the ranch; keep Matt occupied with chores."

Mary wanted to know if Marshal Hendricks would psess charges against Harris. Bill told her that he had lost his temper and drawn first. The rancher closed his eyes, not so much from pain, but to keep from seeing his wife's displeasure. "I'll admit it, Mary. I was a fool. But I like poker, and then Harris sat in, and I did catch him shady."

"He wanted that," Frayne said.

He went out into the sunshine; Bridges looked at him, but Frayne did not

speak. Bridges watched with a silence while the doctor went over to the front of the Mercantile and stood beside Marshal Hendricks.

Mary came out and Matt helped her into the buggy and Mary said, "Good-by, Doc. I'll be in tomorrow." Bridges nodded and turned the team.

MARSHAL HENDRICKS watched them leave Cinch Ring.

"Rockwell and Wade Harris won't move against the woman, Doc. This valley would be in an uprising if they did; but I don't know about Matt Bridges."

"I doubt if they'll jump Bridges."

Hendricks turned dull eyes on him. "On what do you base that idea, Frayne?"

"Rockwell wanted Wade Harris to kill young Warner. He wants Bill out of the way because Warner is spreading his cattle out too much. Matt Bridges only works for Warner. Rockwell wants Warner gone, but Matt is only the hired hand; if Bridges is killed, Rockwell gains nothing—Warner is still around."

Hendricks looked down at his scuffed boots. An ant was crawling across the plank, and the marshal put his boot out to crush him; he changed his mind, and let the ant go its laborious way across the splintery pine plank.

"What can I do?" Hendricks spoke gruffly. "I've had the county-seat give me the power of a deputy-sheriff. That means my jurisdiction extends beyond town out on the range. But what can I do, Doc?"

Frayne waited, listening, thinking.

"Bill Warner was a fool; he was sucked in on the deal. By luck, Wade Harris didn't kill him. I can't arrest Harris."

"You can do like the rest of us. Only stand and wait."

"That's the hell of it." Hendricks stabbed him with a quick glance. "Why didn't Rockwell move against the farmers? They're cutting up his former range."

Frayne held his hand out, palm vertical. "Feel that wind?"

Hendricks said, "Hot as though it blew across hell. Damn that Rockwell

(Continued On Page 92)

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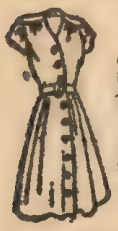

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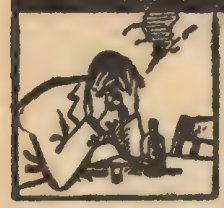

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(Continued From Page 91)

for a smart bugger. He knows the wind and sun will drive their wheat down and make them move; this country will never be farming country."

"Unless irrigation comes in."

"But it isn't here. Those farmers'll be gone come fall."

Doc Frayne nodded. "So Rockwell figures, and so all the rest of us know. You just have to wait, Marshal; young Bill will be in bed for two weeks, anyway—I'll see to that."

"Hell!"

Hendricks' small hands played together, rubbing together, showing what his face hid. Frayne walked across the street toward the saloon, remembering those thin hands, remembering their movements. Hendricks was square and he'd take no orders, not from the devil himself.

And Doc Frayne knew Rockwell had given orders to the marshal, and he knew Hendricks had told Rockwell to go to hell.

That was the way it was.

IT WAS dazzling bright outside. Inside the brightness left and stale odors and shadows replaced it. Odors of beer and whiskey and the small smell of many cigarets and many cigars.

Doc Frayne went to the pool-table and looked at it, running his fingers across the greeness, and this was rough to his sensitive fingers. He studied it and saw no blood on it, but this careful study was only a pose; he knew the two men at the bar were watching him, and Williams watched him also. "The blood didn't seep through."

Williams was wiping a whiskey-bottle, but the bottle was already sparkling clean, and the medico knew this was only something to put energy into. Williams said, "I'm sorry, Doc," and he held out his hand.

Frayne took the hand. "Old friends can never be bad friends, Williams."

"Name it, Doc."

He ordered whiskey.

Rockwell was silent; so was Harris. Frayne drank and put his glass down, turned it slowly and watched the light dance across it. Then he looked up at tall Mike Rockwell.

His quick glance, trained and sure,

marked the cowman's face, seeing its sallowness and lack of color, the sinking below the cheekbones. Rockwell had lost thirty pounds in the last few months, and although Doc Frayne had not told him, the cowman was suffering from some unknown ailment, and Frayne could not diagnose it.

"How do you feel, Mr. Rockwell?"

Mike Rockwell said, "This ain't no place to call out a man's health," and Frayne tried to keep back his amused smile.

Wade Harris was stiff, almost too stiff.

Doc Frayne kept turning his glass. The light showed in it and then died, for the thickness of the seams shot it aside, making a prism of the glass. Blue and green lights played along its bottom and then when the glass made another part-circle, these died and blended into the sallow light of the saloon.

A man's thoughts swing to odd things at particular moments. Doc found himself thinking. I can see why this glass acts as a prism, but Harris can't, and neither can Rockwell. He pushed it aside and wondered if too much knowledge were not, as he'd once read, a dangerous thing. No—not too much, a little, that was it.

Rockwell said, "I'd've felt better, had Harris killed Bill Warner; the farmers will go but Warner and his cattle will stay."

Frayne said, "He has a wife soon to have a child, friend. Is not it more important that child have a father, than your cattle have grass?"

"I trailed in here, and it's my range."

Doc Frayne looked at Williams, but the saloon-man's face was without thoughts. Frayne asked, "What will you do?"

"That's my business."

Frayne looked at his sallowness, the peaks of his thin shoulders, and he realized a man can go down hill physically, and yet be the last to know it, or admit it. That was odd, in a way. Maybe it was pride, or maybe it stemmed from ignorance; a man lived with his body and knew less about it than he did about anything else.

"You brought Bill Warner in here," Harris said. "You staked him to cattle

(Continued On Page 94)

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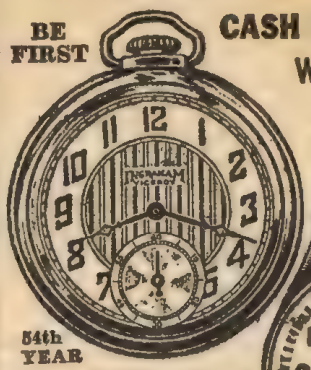

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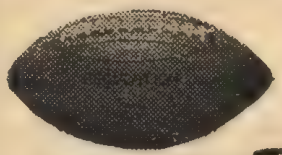

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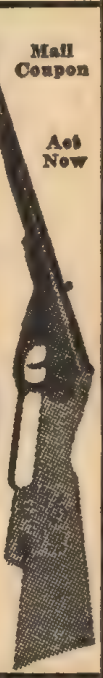

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(Continued From Page 93)

and an outfit. It looks to me, Dock, like it's your problem, too."

Frayne said, "I repeat your boss. That's my business."

Rockwell muttered, "We're getting nowhere."

Doc Frayne took his glass again, watched the light reflect on it. He kept watching it, for this screened his thoughts, and then it became clear. Either Rockwell or young Bill Warner would have to die; there was no other way, no in-between solution here.

Both were proud; both headstrong; both had allowed this pride, this stubborness, to mark their futures. This lay clear of ahead of them, like two trails under the sun, and these went through the buttes, rough and bright with colors, and they they met and became one...

One trail.

He saw these, and wondered and hoped for the right thought, and then it came. It flashed and became bright, glowed with its hot intensity, and he knew then how he would keep those trails from blending and joining and becoming one path.

BILL WARNER had been in an Eastern reform school. Doc Frayne had known his mother, back in Pennsylvania, and she had written to him, had gotten her son out to Montana. Bill had punched cows for Mike Rockwell, fell in love with the cow-business, and Frayne had staked him after Bill had married Mary, who had worked in the Spade Bit Cafe.

He had settled down rapidly and now with his first child soon to arrive, was a steady young chap. Only he and Frayne knew about those other days back in the city. The doctor had tried to talk Bill into starting on some other range, but Warner had his mind set on this grass; thus he had crossed Mike Rockwell, who also had farmers coming in to bother him.

Frayne had two men carry Bill's bed to the hotel, then he stood and joshed with Mrs. Davidson, who ran the hostelry and its accompanying restaurant. He got there at four and stayed in the kitchen talking to the buxom matron. "Why don' you marry me, Nellie?"

Nellie had her arms in biscuit dough, "I've been hitched four times, Doc. I

like you and you like me but we'd never make a go of it. We're both to independent. That's what we are."

She looked toward the restaurant. Nobody was in the dining-room. She kissed him on the cheek. "That was nice," Frayne said.

She kept working, and finally people came in for supper. First was the clerk in the bank, then other steady customers. Finally Rockwell and Wade Harris entered and sat down and Mrs. Davidson went out for their orders.

Frayne said, "Here are some biscuits. These are harder. Give them to Rockwell; he's got tough teeth, he bites off a lot at once."

"That I'll do, Doc."

Frayne watched her wide form leave. He saw her set the biscuits down in front of Mike Rockwell. She came back, eyes twinkling. "I don't want you to call my biscuits hard."

"They're like rocks."

She threw one at him, and he went out the back door, the biscuit hitting the casing and falling to the floor, where the dog got it.

Frayne went to his office.

Shadows were long, and he sat there, watching them group across the street. He took the hypodermic syringe out of his coat pocket, wiped its needle with a piece of cloth he had dampened with a solution from a bottle.

He couldn't sit down; he had to walk. Frayne walked the floor, sat down again, had to get up. His heart was beating too hard.

He kept himself in his chair.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Jones came in, panting a little. Doc Frayne turned in his chair and said, "Why are you running?"

She told him that Rockwell had taken sick, down in the hotel dining-room. "His belly."

"His trouble isn't in his belly; it's in his head."

"I'm serious, Doc; he got sick at the table. They called me down. You better look at him."

"I've thought for a long time he's had something wrong with him. His color isn't good and he's lost weight."

(Continued On Page 96)

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REAL WESTERN

(Continued From Page 95)

MIKE ROCKWELL lay on a bench, eyes closed. "My belly," he said. "Right in there."

Doc Frayne felt. "Hard to lie straight?"

"Yes."

Frayne straightened. "Get him to my office." He remembered young Bill Warner upstairs.

They got the stretcher and two men carried him into Frayne's office and laid him on the bed. Frayne sent the men out and one asked, "Looks like appendicitis to me," and Frayne said, "Maybe it is."

Mrs. Jones had taken off Rockwell's clothes. "You never know what will hit you next, when you're well."

"Rockwell hasn't been well, though."

Mrs. Jones said, "What do you say?"

Doc Frayne probed the man's white belly; the flesh and muscle was tight. He took hold of the cowman's wrist, then followed Mrs. Jones into the next room and closed the door.

"Appendicitis?"

Frayne nodded.

"They operate now. I read that in one of your journals. We have poor light though."

Frayne said, "We'll have to try."

He got a hypodermic needle and slowly filled it from a bottle, his back to his nurse. He found Rockwell's arm and put the needle in, pinching the flesh; Rockwell opened his eyes, then closed them.

"Get two lamps and reflectors."

Mrs. Jones turned toward the office. Frayne had hold of Rockwell's wrist. He said, "Wait a minute."

Mrs. Jones stopped and sent him a sharp, questioning glance.

Mike Rockwell's knees lifted a little, then straightened, and Doc Frayne let his hand drop, and probed the man's belly a little.

"Ruptured," he said slowly.

Mrs. Jones took Rockwell's wrist. "No pulse." She looked at Doc Frayne. "I've read where a sudden rupture can cause instantaneous death." She stood, still surprised. Frayne knew she was thinking of Bill and Mary Warner. "I'd best notify the undertaker."

She left and Doc Frayne got a bottle

from his cupboard and put it in his pocket. It was empty; he threw it toward the alley and heard it break against a boulder, then went to the saloon.

"Whiskey, Williams."

Williams said, "We heard, Doc."

Wade Harris drank down the bar. He put down his glass with, "He's had a tough time with his belly; he's gone down fast, and I told him so, and I guess he didn't realize just how sick he was."

Frayne looked at Harris' eyes. They were without shock and were expressionless. "And what about, you, Wade?"

Something ran across Harris' eyes, and Doc Frayne knew it was fear. "He was just my boss; he's got a nephew in St. Louis. He's no cowman; he'll sell off the stock. There's no place for me here when he comes."

Frayne said, "Another whiskey, Williams."

Harris walked out, mounted, and left town.

Frayne had left his office-door open. A sparrow came in, head perked, and jumped across the floor. Doc Frayne fed him each evening. The sparrow saw a crumb on the floor, at the spot where Frayne had cleaned his hypo after coming from the hotel kitchen.

The sparrow pecked at the crumb, decided it was too small to eat. Doc Frayne would feed him wheat. Wheat was better than a biscuit crumb; he flew to the back of Doc Frayne's chair, and preened his feathers, and waited.

THE END

INDIANS ARE INTERESTING PEOPLE

(Continued From Page 89)

that old couple had a hard time last winter. He didn't get the mink nor rabbits he expected. I carried them on the books to help them out." "Does he owe you?" "Oh—a little". "Look it up". It was $27. "I wish to pay it. I really didn't know that such individuals could be found among tribes. Also, give me a carton of that smoking tobacco; Peter thinks that's the best in the world".

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Black Shirt, Gunfighter

Fact Feature

★ ★

by REX WHITECHURCH

ONE OF the strangest stories to come from the records of the Old West is that of Joe Kansas, commonly known around 1860 in his native habitats as Old Black Shirt. Joe wore his black shirt for thirty years, perhaps not the same one, but a solid black shirt which showed he was in mourning over the woman he'd killed when in his early twenties. Dodge City knew him as the Sad Man Joe, Abilene as the man who never smiled. And it all dated back to Joe's days as an adept gunfighter when he had few equals, if any, and was considered Wild Bill Hickok's match. In fact men had tried to bring Joe Kansas and Wild Bill together, but never succeeded, simply because the two gunslicks were pals and occasionally helped each other out of perilous places.

But handsome Joe, whose real name was Nedding, a native of Ohio, had something in his past he couldn't forget. In a gunfight with two drunken cowhands in Hayes, Kansas, Joe had accidentally sent a bullet through the heart of the woman he loved—Sally Benson, a blonde, with baby-blue eyes who was a percentage dancer at the *Hayes Pleasure Palace.* There had been some talk of their plans to be married and Joe had bought his girl a team of buggy horses for which he'd paid five hundred dollars. Joe Kansas was quite a gambler in those days and loved his poker; he was lucky, too.

Accosted by the two bullies in the main street of the little trail town, Joe had promptly dispatched them with two well directed and awfully swift bullets. But Sally, running toward him, had screamed, "Look out, Joe, here comes their friends!" Sally had seen the three men loom up near the livery stable with drawn guns; knowing they were friends of the men Joe had just killed, she sought to save her lover. Consequently she got in the way.

Joe knew it was his bullet that killed her, and he nearly lost his mind. Holding the dying girl in his arms, his tears dropped on her comely, paling face, and he felt his heart crumbling to pieces. The town marshal and deputies were routing the three who had tried to kill Joe, and to the crescendo of their gunfire, Joe Kansas saw his girl breathe her last. They had to drag him away from her corpse.

He never got over it; his black shirt was an earmark that finally led to his death.

Joe got in the way of a bullet fired by Caleb Winters, a close friend, when the latter shot at a mad dog, and the bullet hit Joe in the leg. It was twilight and in the dust Winters had failed to see the black clad man who tried to catch the dog with his hands. Joe fell, wounded and a few days later died when blood poisoning resulted.

He spent an unhappy life, drifting from pillar to post, once serving as assistant marshal of Deadwood. He was a great gunfighter and had a dozen notches in his gun handles when he died; he remained active well past his sixty-first year.

Black Shirt loved kids and horses; he had always gone far out of his way for both, and they loved him.

His mounument at Abilene simply said:

Joe Nedding
Black Shirt
The Sad Man
He never laughed

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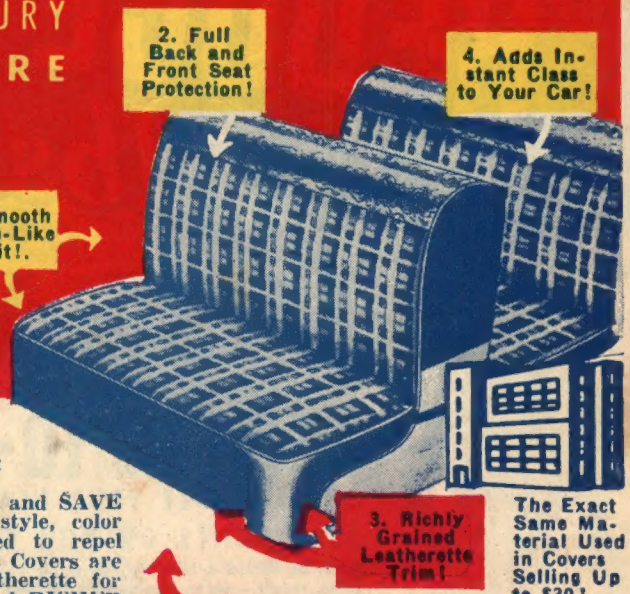
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